

“Do Justice, Love Kindness, Walk Humbly”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Congregational Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
January 29, 2023 – Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

[Micah 6:1-8; Matthew 5:1-12](#)

How many of you who were around in the 1970s and 80s remember listening to the radio program called the *American Top 40*? Being a child in this era, I grew up enjoying regularly listening to the soothing voice of the program’s host, Casey Kasem, as he led us through a song-by-song countdown of the most popular songs in the United States over the course of the week based on record sales and radio airplay, which also included, in between songs, brief bios on the musical artists or songwriters, interesting bits of trivia, and the occasional long-distance dedication of a song from a listener to another.

I imagine that if Mr. Kasem, who passed away in 2014, were alive today and were to host a program featuring the top 40 Bible passages in America (and around the world) this week (and over the centuries), his countdown would end up to revealing both of today’s scripture lessons somewhere in the top ten. These two passages, the Beatitudes of Jesus and the prophet Micah’s exhortation to “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with [your] God” (Micah 6:8), surely are two of the all-time greats. I imagine that Casey would list them right up there with other hits like Psalm 23, the Ten Commandments, the Golden Rule to love your neighbor as yourself, 1 Corinthians 13, and the first chapter of Genesis. And I imagine that those of us who are members of the United Church of Christ, with our tradition of focusing on inclusion and justice being enjoyed by all people, might rank today’s readings at the very top of the list as they offer us some of the guiding principles for our own unique way of living out our faith as servants of God and followers of Christ. Rightly so, I believe, for they offer us a good summary of how we are to be about living during the years we are given to live, an issue that most concerns (or should concern) us all.

The first of today’s great hits from Micah 6 was offered originally to the people of the Kingdom of Judah, sometime around when the northern Kingdom of Israel was being conquered by the Assyrian Empire. Many towns within the southern Kingdom of Judah were also conquered, but Jerusalem was spared when Judah became a vassal state of the Assyrian Empire, offering tribute to Assyria in

exchange for being allowed to remain as a state. It was in this environment, in which the people witnessed the terrible destruction suffered by their neighbors and lived in fear that they too would be destroyed, that Micah's message was delivered to let the people know how they should live in order to please their God.

Pleasing one's god was important to them and to all other the people living in the ancient near east, as it was a satisfied and happy god that would protect you from an invading army, and so the decedents of Israel wondered what would appease their God, Yahweh, and move God to protect them from the Assyrians. Like their neighbors, the children of Israel believed that worshipping their God by offering sacrifices was an essential aspect of keeping their God happy and keeping themselves safe, and so as Assyria threatened, they wondered how much they must worship and how many sacrifices they must offer to please and be saved by God. So the prophet Micah responds by telling them that God *did not* want the sacrifice of thousands of precious rams or for rivers of costly oil to be poured out, but what God *did* want -- what would make God happy -- was for them "to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with [their] God." That is what their overrun neighbor Israel failed to do, but that is what God was asking of them: Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

This, of course, is God's desire not only for the threatened and besieged people of Judah, but for their descendants and spiritual descendants as well. And so we who worship the same God are still asked by God for this to be our offering: Not a thousand rams or rivers of oil; not our weekly offered rituals, prayers, and songs; but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. This is *still* what pleases God most.

The second of our readings, the Beatitudes, which Jesus offered at the beginning of his Sermon on the Mount, is another of the Bible's greatest hits that also tells us how to live in ways that please God. In his sermon, Jesus tells us what doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God looks like, and he teaches that those who live in this way are blessed, that is, they are made happy. Blessed, or happy, are the humble, those who mourn or are meek. Blessed are those who long to do what is right, those who desire to do justice. Blessed are those who are merciful and make peace, those who love kindness. So Jesus teaches from the

mountain to all of us that below that the ways of living that please God and make God happy as identified by Micah are the very ways of being and living that will satisfy our own souls and make us happy.

No wonder these are some of the greatest hits! For aren't we all longing to learn how to be fulfilled? And don't we all really want to know what God really wants from us? This is it! We have a wonderful recipe for creating a life that is full of life and pleases the giver of life: Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with God.

And so we take these things seriously. We are committed to them for God, for ourselves, and for our community of faith. And the more we can join together in our acts of doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly, the more our church will be blessed and become more of what God calls us to be. And the more we can live out our commitments as a community, the more the world around us will be blessed.

And isn't the world around us in need of more blessing and more happiness? We know too well that our world is hurting. So many people around the world are suffering. There is so much hatred, so much injustice, so much violence. We fear as empires continue to seek to expand and vanquish their neighbors. Our ways of taking from one another and taking from the planet itself -- ancient, unenlightened ways that are still in practice in what we consider to be our more enlightened modern times -- are leading us to our own destruction.

But into the gloom shines a bright light, illuminating a path that leads away from the depravity and darkness and towards blessedness and light. Dear friends, let us walk this path together by our own faithful and humble acts of worship, compassionate and kind service, and bold and persistent work to enact true justice for all people. As we journey together on this good path, may we be a blessing to God and the world and may we be blessed. Amen.