

Just Kindness

'With what shall I come before the LORD,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt-offerings,
with calves a year old?
Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
with tens of thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?'
He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

What does the Lord require of you? Do justice. Love kindness. And walk humbly with your God. This is one of the greatest scripture passages of all time. Like the golden rule or Jesus telling us the law means loving the lord our God and our neighbor as ourselves and everything else is commentary- this is one of those verses that just kind of sums it all up. What is faith all about? Do justice. Love kindness. And walk humbly with your God. Period.

At my home church at the end of every service as a benediction we would sing a version of this verse called, "What does the Lord require of you?" Every Sunday we'd sing this. When he gave me my Bible, the Bible that saw me through college, seminary, and all my ministry to date, my dad the kids call Grandpa John, wrote on the cover page: "To Ken: May this book guide you in the paths of justice, kindness, and humility." The book is on it's second cover now- and one day I hope to hand it off to another generation.

Do justice. Love kindness. And walk humbly with your God. It's one of those texts that is just so popular. But the thing about popularity- sometimes the more familiar a thing is, the less we really notice it, or think about it. The more familiar something is to us, the easier it is to just take it for granted. And I realized this week that this is one of those things for me- this passage is so familiar that I haven't really given much thought about it. And I've missed out, because as simple as it seems- there is a LOT going on here- especially with the first two requirements of justice and kindness.

Do justice and love kindness. It sounds so simple to me. But you know, in real life, justice and kindness, if they aren't exactly in opposition, they are at least in tension for us most of the time. You can have justice. You can have kindness. But in most cases- you have to pick.

Take the image you always see for justice- a woman wearing a blindfold, holding scales in one hand and a sword in the other. Now, I have to admit this image has always kind of bugged me, I mean purely from the perspective of safety. I tend to like folks holding things like power tools or swords UNblindfolded. And I don't think that's too much to ask for, really.

But of course this image isn't meant to be realistic- it's symbolic, I get that. The blindfold is to symbolize that ideally, IDEALLY, justice should be meted out to all purely on the merits of the facts of the case entirely independent on who you are, the color of your skin, whether you are male or female, and certainly not how expensive your attorney is. This is the ideal- that justice is blind to such things.

And the sword is a reminder that justice has teeth. The sword is a reminder that justice isn't about being nice, it isn't about being kind- it's about seeking after the truth. And if justice has to pick between truth and niceness- there's no contest. The truth will out every time. Anyone who has stood before a judge or a jury knows, trials are not in the business of kindness- and they can feel like very cold places indeed.

We saw this recently right here in our own neck of the woods. If any of you followed the faith healing trial over in Oregon City you saw this. Earlier this month 12 men and women had the unenviable task of deciding the fate of Jeff and Marci Beagley. The Beagley's were members of a very small church, The Followers of Christ, and believed in using faith alone to bring about medical healing. Their son, Neal, developed an infection from a congenital urinary tract disorder, and, because he wasn't treated, died from it. And the jury had to decide whether the family was negligent.

And it was awful. The jury was just in agony over this. Many jurors spoke publicly about how hard this case was- something you don't see very often. And when the verdict was read- many of the jurors were in tears, which again is highly unusual. It was because the jurors all agreed that this couple was evil, they weren't malicious- they loved their son. Several of the jurors said what was so hard is that the parents were good, kind hearted people, but of course trials aren't about whether people are kind hearted- they are about the law, they are about justice. And in spite of their tears the jury had to find the couple negligent.

For most of us justice and kindness, if not in opposition, are at least in tension with one another.

But not for Micah. Not for Micah. For Micah justice and kindness fit together with no trouble at all. For Micah justice and kindness are like chocolate and peanut butter- two great things that are only better together. Micah could have easily have said, “Do justice or love kindness, but he doesn’t. He writes: Do justice AND love kindness AND walk humbly with your God. Grammatically, Micah uses what scholars call the waw consecutive, a conjunction that just ties the three requirements together like they’re holding hands.

I think the reason that Micah sees justice and kindness going together like this- is because of the way he thinks about justice. See, Micah doesn’t think about justice like a judge does- he thinks about it like a prophet does. We’ve been through all the major prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel, and today we’re blasting through the minor prophets and next week we’ll be done with them all. And if there is ONE thing I want you to take away from the prophets it’s this- prophets call us to justice. Prophets call a people to God’s justice. Their main business isn’t crystal balling the future- their main business, their bread and butter, is calling us to justice.

And the way they think about justice- well it’s different than we do. See, if they were to make a statue symbolizing justice- the first thing they would do is they would take the blindfold off. They would take the blindfold off, because as the prophets understand it- justice is not blind. It’s the opposite. Justice is about God seeing- it is about God seeing us, seeing how we treat one another, and especially seeing how we care for the most vulnerable. In the prophetic tradition justice isn’t blind at all- it is all about there being a God and God seeing how we care for the least of our brothers and sisters.

And that's the second thing they would change. First they'd take off the blind fold- the next thing they would do is they would tip the scales a little bit. They would have to tip the scales a little bit. Why? Because when this God sees us, according to the prophets, God doesn't measure us, or weigh us, all the same. When it comes to justice, the prophets say, God cares about everybody, to be sure- but God especially keeps an eye on four types of people: the widows, the orphans, the poor, and the foreigners in our midst, the strangers sojourning with us. In other words when it comes to justice the prophets say- don't ask whether the powerful are getting a fair shake. The powerful can take care of themselves. The prophets say if you want to know whether you are a just people you have to look at the least powerful- you have to look at the widows, the orphans, the poor, and the foreigners living in your midst. If THEY are being treated fairly- then you might say you have justice.

And I think it's because of this fundamental orientation towards the least, the last, and the lost, I think it's because of this that Micah can say without batting an eyelash that justice and kindness go together so well. Because prophets aren't like judges who are bound by reason and statutes- prophets are filled with the compassion, the pathos of the living God. And doing justice is intimately bound up in caring for people in need, of overflowing with mercy and kindness.

Sometimes we see this in big ways- ways that are larger than life. If you've seen the movie *The Insider* you know the story of Jeffery Wigand. Wigand was a senior vice president for Brown and Williams Tobacco company for research. After working there for several year he began to make recommendations regarding health and human safety-

one of the additives they were using to increase the amount of nicotine delivered into the bloodstream was discovered to be dangerous. He recommended they stop using it. CEO Thomas Sandefur buried his reports. And Wigand persisted, they fired him. And not only did they fire him, but when he threatened to go public, they vowed to destroy him. They created a 500 page smear report and sent it to every major news outlet. They sent multiple death threats against him, his wife, and his children. And when he made the decision to go public with what he knew, information that ultimately led to the 260 billion judgment against big tobacco, he knew going public meant they would do everything in their power to break him financially. And they did. Worse than that, though, the stress of it all cost him his marriage.

But when he was interviewed for 60 minutes and Mike Wallace asked him if he would do it all over again, he said in a heartbeat. Because he knew it was the right thing, the just thing to do, and not only that- but it was because of his care for young people, and how he knew they were targeting them that drove him to do it. It was his kindness, his compassion, as well as his sense of justice.

But you know you few of us have the opportunity, the terrible responsibility I should say, of doing justice and loving kindness in such a dramatic way. For most of us justice and kindness come down to how we act in smaller, though no less crucial, moments.

When Melis was a girl her family moved all over. Her dad worked for Shell oil, and they liked to give folks like him experience in a lot of different situations. Some of the places were easier than others- probably her best memory is when they lived in a little

town about an hour outside of Columbus, Ohio, Lancaster, Ohio. Lancaster was a small town, the school had two grades per every classroom, and she remembers the families and the kids all being so friendly and kind. It didn't matter what kind of clothes you wore or if you had glasses or not- everyone would be your friend in school anyway. And for a kid who had to move around- you bet that was an important thing.

Well, they moved from there to Kingwood, Texas, a wealthy suburb of Houston. And Kingwood was the exact opposite of Columbus- she remembers it being like a 90210 kind of place where the labels on your clothes determined the friends you were allowed to have and where the kids in high school drove nicer cars than the teachers.

And to move into this- well it was awful. Especially when you take into consideration that her mom simply didn't believe in buying clothes just because of the label- in fact it was worse. Her mom made a lot of her clothes and just wasn't getting that snotty junior high kids just don't have the same appreciation for homemade clothes that moms do. So Melis was just doing her best to keep her head down and not draw attention to herself. And then, minding her own business, probably trying to cover up a sweater with crotched puppies on it her mom thought would be just darling- she saw it happen. She saw Michael, a kid who today would probably have been diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum, but in junior high was simply referred to as dog meat, Michael Wade was being tormented by a group of boys like normal. Only that day was worse for some reason- and after taunting him they tripped him and his books went flying and he wound up sprawled on the ground looking like a yard sale. And with all the popular kids laughing, Melis saw this and just burned inside. And not caring whether it would burn every social bridge she might ever have, she stood up, walked over, and

helped him to his feet, and helped him pick up his books. He was so upset and not great with words anyway- and he just ran off. But, unbeknownst to her, somebody saw what she did. A teacher saw what she did. And Melis was made student of the month for doing justice and loving kindness. I'm pretty sure that didn't help her popularity any, but knowing her, I don't think she had much choice. It's how she was raised. She was taught to do justice, to love kindness, and, when you live in Kingwood and you wear homemade clothes in middle school, you really don't have any choice but to walk humbly with your God.

In the days ahead if your eyes are open you will face a similar situation. You will hear someone belittle, or humiliate another, mainly because they can. It probably won't be dramatic and it probably have been going on for some time. But when you hear this and see this now- you will have a choice. You can keep looking the other way- or you can do something about it, you can do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with your God. I wonder what choice you'll make?

As you think about this, I want us to close this morning the way my home church ended every Sunday. Although there are three parts to the song, we used to just sing two, and we divided it up between the men and the women. Men: What does the Lord require of you, what does the Lord require of you. And the women: To do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with your God. To do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with your God. **Amen.**