

Pleasing
Rev. Nicole Farley
First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
January 29, 2017

Micah 6:1-8

¹ Hear what the Lord says:

Rise, plead your case before the mountains,
and let the hills hear your voice.

² Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the Lord,
and you enduring foundations of the earth;
for the Lord has a controversy with his people,
and he will contend with Israel.

³ ‘O my people, what have I done to you?
In what have I wearied you? Answer me!

⁴ For I brought you up from the land of Egypt,
and redeemed you from the house of slavery;
and I sent before you Moses,
Aaron, and Miriam.

⁵ O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised,
what Balaam son of Beor answered him,
and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal,
that you may know the saving acts of the Lord.’

⁶ ‘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?

⁷ 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?’

⁸ 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?

Matthew 5:1-12

¹ When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ²Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

³ ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

- ⁴ ‘Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
- ⁵ ‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
- ⁶ ‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
- ⁷ ‘Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
- ⁸ ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
- ⁹ ‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
- ¹⁰ ‘Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- ¹¹ ‘Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

How do I begin today? How do I begin to speak on the topic of pleasing, on what God finds pleasing? Micah tells us God desires from us mortals that we do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. Jesus tells us that the blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, those who are merciful, those who make peace. I speak today not on politics but on my education and my understanding of what and who God calls God’s followers to be. I acknowledge, however, that there is currently clear intersectionality between political policy and practiced faith. As a faith leader I am burdened with the glorious purpose of lifting up God’s word to us, no matter what it conflicts with and especially **when** it conflicts. Building walls, impeding sanctuary, and refusing welcome conflict with the Bible.

Two weeks ago we asked our newly elected officers questions which rightly apply to us all as Christians. Do you accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God’s Word to you? Will you fulfill your ministry in obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of Scripture, and be continually guided by our confessions? Will you in your

own life seek to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, love your neighbors, and work for the reconciliation of the world? Friends, do not be deceived: what is pleasing is not always the same as what is pleasant.

Jeremiah 22: Thus says the Lord: Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place.¹ 1 John 2: Whoever says, 'I am in the light', while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness.² Matthew 25: Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."³

God has told us what is good; and what does the Lord require of us? DO justice. This is work and it is rarely pleasant but we know it is pleasing. Prophet after prophet cries out for justice. Jesus proclaims and embodies what justice is. Pleasant is saying justice matters, justice is important. Pleasing is speaking up, standing up, reaching out, relinquishing what should be shared. God desires that we love kindness, but kindness isn't exactly the purest translation of the Hebrew. God desires that we love *hesed* (חֶסֶד) - some would define this as "covenant loyalty,"⁴ others as "mercy" or "lovingkindness,"⁵ and others as "loyal love."⁶ It's been written that "*Hesed* is one of the richest, most powerful words in the Old Testament. It reflects the loyal love that people committed to the God of the Bible should have for one another. It is not a 'mood.' *Hesed* is not primarily something people 'feel.' It is something people DO for other people who have no claim on them."⁷ There it is again - DO. Love one

¹ Jeremiah 22:3

² 1 John 2:9

³ Matthew 25:37-40

⁴ <http://biblehub.com/text/micah/6-8.htm>

⁵ <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?t=kjv&strongs=h2617>

⁶ <https://discovertheword.org/2010/10/18/the-hebrew-term-hesed-and-what-it-means-for-our-lives-today/>

⁷ <https://discovertheword.org/2010/10/18/the-hebrew-term-hesed-and-what-it-means-for-our-lives-today/>

another with a loyalty that cannot be broken. Pleasing but often much too challenging to be pleasant. Walk humbly with God. Humbly - expressing a spirit of deference or submission.⁸ Our dog, Buddy, is not what you would call an alpha dog. He waits back for us to enter doorways first, sometimes so stubbornly that even when we tell him to go ahead, he'll stand in a narrow entrance, leaving us stuck behind him while he waits for us to go in first. How often do we let God lead? Pleasing. But we find it more pleasant to follow our own desires, occasionally looking back to double-check that our desires are in line with God's.

Jesus says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." When we understand what righteousness looks like, its absence should make us ache for it. As Pastor James C. Howell explains, "The dissatisfaction we feel is what draws us toward righteousness."⁹ We ache so greatly, we hunger so painfully, we thirst so desperately that waiting for aid to come is not an option - we must go and seek to fill that absence. It is far from a pleasant thing to feel this way but to want so intensely for righteousness for others is most pleasing to our God who wants the same thing.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy." Howell writes:

"How hard is it to be merciful? Mercy is not doing nothing. The Greek word *eleos* suggests a connotation of pouring out, the way we might pour out a flask of oil. Mercy is a pouring out. Mercy is when I unscrew the lid on what is precious to me and pour it out on you. I may not think I have all that much to pour out, but the merciful pour anyway, thinking only of the wounded one who needs the healing balm of mercy."¹⁰

Vulnerable and scary, not pleasant, yet very, very pleasing to the God who unselfishly thinks only of us, who need God's healing balm.

And "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." Not the peace-speakers but the peace-makers. The peace the first hearers knew, the peace of the Hebrew Bible, was *shalom*. Howell specifies that "The Old Testament vision of peace, of *shalom*, is all about the well-being of God's people, of *all* God's people...*Shalom* is about justice..."¹¹ Makers of *shalom* must DO to bring well-being to all God's people. You know

⁸ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/humbly>

⁹ James C. Howell, *The Beatitudes for Today* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006) p. 60.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

this “doing” is difficult work, for few undertake it and humanity has been struggling for it for millennia. This is the same kind of doing I spoke of two weeks ago but the verb I used then was “love.” I said, “The love we are called to is what got Jesus crucified and Dr. King assassinated.” It is true, too, that trying to make well-being for all God’s people is what got Jesus crucified and Dr. King assassinated. Nothing near pleasant but supremely pleasing to God.

I leave you with one more reading on what is pleasing, this one from Luke.

“Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he said, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ He said to him, ‘What is written in the law? What do you read there?’ He answered, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.’ And he said to him, ‘You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.’

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’ Jesus replied, ‘A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, “Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.” Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?’ He said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’”¹²

Let us pray: God, we pray that you will find our doings pleasing in your sight. Amen.

¹² Luke 10:25-37