



**Sermons from St. Marks  
United Church of Christ  
New Albany, Indiana**



**What is Good?**

**Text: Micah 6:1-8**

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**February 3, 2008**

When Jimmy Carter was elected President, at his Inauguration in 1977, he had the passage from Micah 6:8, read at the ceremony. The words were spoken:

*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?*

For many, it was their first exposure to Micah, one of the more obscure characters in the Bible. For Carter, a lifelong Sunday School teacher at his home church in Plains, Georgia, this was a teachable moment to a nation about one of the more obscure prophets in the Bible.

The issue Micah had with the people of Israel was pretty typical of most of the prophets. He was trying to get them to be faithful to *Yahweh*, the God of Israel.

This issue was a recurring theme. The people often found themselves attracted to the other gods and not to their own God, the one true God. Often, for the people of Israel, who spent a great deal of time either in captivity or as nomads, the other gods were more appealing to them than God. The prophets, more often than not, had to remind them who God was and how God had been there for them.

And, in the process of this, would remind people about their own conduct. Micah does it here by saying that there were three things required by God, for God's people, *but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.*

To do justice.

To do justice---what does this mean for a Christian?

Most people of faith, at some point, feel good about God. They discover the love of God, they begin building a relationship with God and feel good.

There's good news and bad news about this.

The good news is that it's good to feel good about God. It's really important to come to understand the love and grace of God and feeling good about this is, frankly, good.

The bad news is that true faith isn't about feeling good. It's not feeling bad either. In actuality, it's not about feeling. Faith isn't about feeling, it's about doing something.

And, the 'something' we do is hungering for justice. And often, this hunger for justice, which is inspired by our faith, makes us feel troubled, even bad.

When I read the Bible, many of my favorite portions and passages and stories come from the prophets, people like Micah. They all have some things in common.

They all have great faith.

And they are all filled with angst, distress, and passion against the injustices they see and encounter every day. So often, when confronted with evil and injustice, they didn't feel good about their faith, but struggled mightily because their faith was what enabled them to see injustice.

In the Beatitudes in Matthew's Gospel that we are most blessed, when we 'hunger and thirst for righteousness.

To have faith isn't always to feel good, it's so often to feel hunger, thirst, even angst when we encounter injustices.

Secondly, Micah uses the words 'to love kindness.' In some translations, these words are translated as 'to love tenderly.' It is an important, even impassioned invitation and challenge to love one another in a profound way.

On Thursday of this week, February 3<sup>rd</sup>, is the 62<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of an event that, in so many ways, personified Micah's words.

It was February 3, 1943 and the Dorchester, a freighter which had been converted into a troop ship, was carrying American troops to Europe to fight in World War II. Off the coast of Greenland the ship was torpedoed by a German U-Boat.

There was pandemonium and panic on the ship. The ship began to sink and many of the men on board knew that they were going to die that night.

In the midst of the chaos, the panic, and the absolute fear, four men came forward--four chaplains.

Rev. George Fox was a Methodist Minister from Vermont.

Rabbi Dr. Alexander Goode was a Reformed Jewish Rabbi from Washington DC.

Rev. Clark Poling was a minister in the Reformed Church in America from New York.

Rev. John Washington was a Roman Catholic priest from Newark, New Jersey--who I believe went to the same seminary as me.

The four of them stepped forward and began helping the troops.

They gave up their life jackets for others.

In the midst of panic and terror they calmed soldiers down and got them on life boats.

As the ship sank the four men linked arms, prayed together, and died together in the frigid black sea.

They did this in a day and age when even amongst Christian denominations there was very little interaction. Roman Catholics and Protestants did not interact that much in 1943. There would have been very little interaction among Protestants. There would have been virtually no interaction between Christians and Jews.

Yet, these four men put aside differences of background and joined as one. They were propelled by love.

The story is, in so many ways, stunning. It is stunning because most people usually find ways and excuses to **not** love.

We don't agree with each other on core political issues, so we often take that as an excuse to not love. The political climate in the United States right now is terrible. The tone of debates is dreadful and many of the commentators, both left and right speak in despicable ways of people who disagree with them. Their differences of opinion, they seem to say, give them the right, even responsibility, not to love.

Christians, who should know better, do the same thing. The tone of the theological discourse in Christianity is as poor as it is politically. People seem to feel that if they have theological disagreements with one another on topics that they are free to treat one another in an unloving manner. It is an invitation to not love.

The story of the four chaplains is, of course, the antithesis of this. They loved. They had tremendous differences with one another, if, from nothing else, a theological perspective. Yet, they loved. This is the kind of love which Micah speaks about.

Then there is walking humbly with God.

Here's a lesson in humility

The US Standard railroad gauge (distance between the rails) is 4 feet, 8.5 inches. That's an exceedingly odd number. Why was that gauge used?

Because that's the way they built them in England, and the US railroads were built by English expatriates. Why did the English people build them like that?

Because the first rail lines were built by the same people who built the pre-railroad tramways, and that's the gauge they used. Why did "they" use that gauge then? Because the people who built the tramways used the same jigs and tools that they used for building wagons, which used that wheel spacing.

Okay! Why did the wagons use that odd wheel spacing? Well, if they tried to use any other spacing the wagons would break on some of the old, long distance roads, because that's the spacing of the old wheel ruts.

So who built these old rutted roads? The first long distance roads in Europe were built by Imperial Rome for the benefit of their legions.

The roads have been used ever since. And the ruts? The initial ruts, which everyone else had to match for fear of destroying their wagons, were first made by Roman war chariots. Since the chariots were made for or by Imperial Rome they were alike in the matter of wheel spacing. Thus, we have the answer to the original questions.

The United States standard railroad gauge of 4 feet, 8.5 inches derived from the original specification for an Imperial Roman army war chariot.

Specs and bureaucracies live forever. So, the next time you are handed a specification and wonder what horse's rear came up with it, you may be exactly right. Because the Imperial Roman chariots were made to be just wide enough to accommodate the back-ends of two war horses.

There's an interesting extension of the story about railroad gauge and horses' behinds. When we see a Space Shuttle sitting on the launch pad, there are two big booster rockets attached to the sides of the main fuel tank. These are the solid rocket boosters, or SRBs. The SRBs are made by Thiokol at a factory in Utah.

The engineers who designed the SRBs might have preferred to make them a bit fatter, but the SRBs had to be shipped by train from the factory to the launch site.

The railroad line to the factory runs through a tunnel in the mountains. The SRBs had to fit through that tunnel. The tunnel is slightly wider than a railroad track, and the railroad track is about as wide as two horses' behinds. So a major design feature of what is arguably the world's most advanced transportation system was determined by the width of a horse's backside.

Humility is so much recognizing that we are not in control of everything, that so much of what we encounter in life has been set in place by another.

To walk humbly with God is to realize that we live, we move, and we walk by God's rules and in God's way rather than our own.

Micah's words, *to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God*, are words for the ages, reminding us that our faith, if real, propels us towards justice, that loving one another is paramount, and that we need to walk humbly with our God, a God who is in control.