

Who here was a “good kid” (quotes included) growing up? Who made sure they did every school assignment, followed every rule, and did their best to be liked and approved of by the authority figures in their life, whether they be parents, teachers, coaches, whoever? Any of you?

I kind of was, to a certain extent. It’s a common tendency!

And it’s a tendency that doesn’t leave us when we become adults. And it isn’t limited just to schoolwork or extracurricular activities. It’s one that can be carried with us throughout our lives... and into different *aspects* of our lives, even our faith.

We want to “do the right things,” the things that will make God happy and the things that will make other people regard us positively...the things that will make us a “good Christian.” And so we come up with a list of things that need to be done, often things like: attend worship every week, give, pray at least once a day, read the Bible every day...or maybe it gets even stricter: you must have this many passages of scripture memorized, you must never use a curse word, you must give a certain percentage to the church, regardless of whatever other charitable giving you do, you must dress a certain way, act a certain way.

It becomes a legalistic trap that leaves no one happy, not even God.

The ancient Jews were given the gift of the Torah, the law, to help them live in harmony with each other and with God. At certain times, though, this gift was not appreciated for what it was. It was either flat-out ignored and led to the oppression and dismissal of the poor, the orphaned and widowed, and others on the edge of society...*or* it was treated like a pass: if you check these boxes or do X, then it doesn’t really matter what else happens. You can still ignore the marginalized. You can still keep distance in your relationship with God.

That’s where the prophets come in. This morning we hear from Micah, a prophet who wants to bring God’s people back into better alignment with God’s desires.

It’s not that the people have been ignoring God or that they haven’t been trying to please God...but it’s clear that they’ve been going about it in the wrong way.

Hear again verses six and seven:

“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 ten thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” (Micah 6:6-7)

Burnt offerings of calves. *A thousand* rams. *Ten thousand rivers* of oil. And that last one, did you catch it? The *firstborn child*.

These are things offered to God in an effort to check to boxes and achieve salvation. Do the things, get the reward, move on.

But that's not what God is looking for, is it? In the very next verse, Micah comes back with the Word of the Lord, almost like a patient parent, calmly reiterating the same request already given so many times:

⁸He 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? (Micah 6:8)

I imagine you've heard this verse before.

It sounds simple, doesn't it? Then why did the ancient Jews, why do *we* seem to do whatever we can to avoid it?

In many ways, we're more ready to jump on the burnt offering, on the giving of a certain amount, on the accomplishing of a certain set of tasks. We want the checklist. We want the one-and-done. We want the things that we can look back on and say, "done," before moving on with our lives.

But that's not what's happening here. That's not what Micah is reporting God requires of us.

God does not require things that we accomplish once and then move on.

"...what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

These are not one-and-done. It is not to "have done justice, to have loved kindness, and to have walked humbly with your God."

These are *ongoing* things. They are not boxes to be checked but a way of living, a way of living that remains with us from our entrance into a life of faith until the moment we die.

But that's the life we're called to, isn't it? That's the life of baptism.

In our baptismal promises, we promise:

to live among God's faithful people,
to hear the word of God and share in the Lord's supper,
to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed,
to serve all people, following the example of Jesus,
and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth? (ELW Affirmation of Baptism)

I don't know about you, but I certainly hear echoes of Micah in there.

And, once again, these are not one-time actions, but things that we are called to throughout our lives. It is a constant wrestling within us, to listen for God's voice and to seek out the ways God is calling us to serve in the world. It can be messy and complicated and sometimes tiring, but it is the work of faith.

It is for this very reason that Christianity wasn't necessarily all that appealing in the immediate years after Jesus' death and resurrection. The prevailing wisdom, particularly for Gentiles, was "offer this deity this thing, get this result." From this point of view, Christianity made no sense. *Humans* are supposed to sacrifice to gods, gods are not supposed to sacrifice for *humans*, especially not their life.

That's why we have this whole passage from Paul's letter to Corinthians about foolishness and wisdom: "The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." (1 Corinthians 18)

This path that we are called to as disciples of Jesus is not the easy, straightforward one we might want. It is a journey, one with ups and downs and constant listening for where God might be leading us. It is about finding little ways and big ways, by ourselves and in community, to follow the guidance of Micah: to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God.

None of it to earn our salvation: God has already done that for us. But it is our *response* to God's liberating salvation, our way of letting God's love and righteousness flow through us, our way to participating in God's reign in our world.

It might not be a checklist you can accomplish the same way you would your Saturday errands.

But you've got this.

Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with God.

You're not doing it alone.

Amen.