***WHAT MORE DO YOU WANT, LORD?***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

February 2, 2020

Texts: Micah 6:1-8 and Matthew 23:23-24

There are times when it seems like God asks a lot of us. “Love your enemies,” Jesus says. And we share the sentiments of the young boy who told God, “I have trouble just loving my brother!” Paul says, “Pray without ceasing!” but much of the time prayer is the farthest thing from our minds. And then we hear these familiar words from Micah: “What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?” and we feel that God is asking just a little too much of us!

There is a scene in *The Wizard of Oz* in which Dorothy, the tin man, and the scarecrow are walking arm in arm on the yellow brick road through a dark, creepy forest. As they imagine the dangers that lurk within those woods, they walk faster and faster with mounting fear, saying: “Lions and tigers and bears, oh my! Lions and tigers and bears, oh my!” That scene came to mind when I read the words of Jesus to the scribes and Pharisees that we heard this morning, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith.” There is a certain rhythm to the words – Lions and tigers and bears, oh my! Justice and mercy and faith, oh my! The fear of the Lord runs through those words of Jesus and of Micah, a fear more daunting than that of lions and tigers and bears. For the words are the words of the Lord spoken to us in the rhythm of Oz. Justice and mercy and faith, oh my! And if you would understand the *OH MY!* then consider those words of the prophet Micah!

The scene is a courtroom – a big courtroom. The walnut bench of the judge towers over us so that we cannot see who sits behind it; the jury box rises around us like the mountains and hills making us feel very small and insignificant. From somewhere above us a booming voice calls out: “*Hear ye! Hear ye! All people shall now fall silent on penalty of imprisonment – or worse – for the hearing of the following case: God v. (*and then a long list of names is read that includes yours and mine*). The Lord has a controversy with his people. Rise now and plead your case.*” Then there is silence in that chamber, until a chair scrapes the floor and slow footsteps echo behind us, and a weary voice speaks in a mixture of anger, pain, and sorrow: “O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me!”

Those questions hang there in the courtroom as the case is laid out, as the stories are told and names are named and places are remembered,

recollections of things God has done for us,

a long litany of people and events and blessings that shaped us from before our births,

dear memories of loved ones that bring tears to our eyes for the blessings they were to us, and

the utterance of sacred words that we cherish in our hopes and hearts, words like *redeemed* and *saved,* *forgiven* and *loved*.

Like the undercurrent of a stream they flow by us and around us, drawing us further and further under until the case closes with these words that put those events into perspective and confirm the indictment of us in those divine questions: “Remember - that you may know the saving acts of the Lord.” We forget so easily! Those saving acts were done for us, for you and for me as surely as they were done for ancient Israel. How then do we answer the charges: “O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you?”

What answer can we offer that will exonerate us? We have been blessed beyond anything we deserve, loved without end, forgiven again and again and again, and still we grow weary of God – we grow

weary of following God’s commandments,

weary of setting aside our own wants and desires,

weary of forgiving others,

weary of always having to do the “right thing”,

weary of trying to understand the tragedies of life,

weary of loving our neighbors who are pretty unlovable,

weary of being servants in a world that values self-made masters,

weary of trying to be disciples of whom so much is expected.

We are weary of God and God’s demands upon us, though we never weary of God’s blessings. We have no defense, no response, except….

Perhaps we might try the Pharisee defense. This trial technique unsuccessfully deployed in the first century offers a litany of things that have been rightly done, the letters of the law fulfilled, good works accomplished. Instead of dwelling on the failures it accentuates the positives.

Lord, I go to church each week.

Lord, I say grace at most meals – except at restaurants.

Lord, I have kept six out of Ten Commandments, maybe seven if you don’t interpret “taking your name in vain” too broadly.

Lord, I tithe – kind of, sort of, in my own way.

Lord, I took a meal to someone who needed it last month.

Lord, I serve on a church committee; that must count for something!

The Pharisee defense tries to assert a self-righteous claim to be holier than our unrighteous neighbors. In the details of the law, it searches for a stake in salvation. I give you a lot, Lord, what more do you want? The sale of papal indulgences in the 16th century was a variation on this defense, and while it was rejected by Martin Luther and John Calvin, it still has some proponents among Presbyterians today. Lord, if you think I’ve fallen short, what about them?

Or perhaps we could try the chutzpah defense. This trial technique, unsuccessfully utilized by Israel in the seventh century BCE, by Job, and most memorably by Adam in the Garden of Eden (*This woman YOU gave to be with me, gave me fruit from the tree*) dares to turn the tables and vent the weariness and frustration of the demands of God upon God. It suggests that God is the one at fault. It asks, “Hey, what do you want from me, Lord?” The prophet Micah records it well: “Shall I bring you burnt offerings – a ram, a thousand rams, thousands of rams in rivers of oil? Do you want my tithe or maybe a double tithe or maybe all my savings? Or is it my firstborn child that you want, a living sacrifice to pay for the sin of my soul? Will that satisfy you? What more do you want from me, Lord! Will you never be satisfied? What will it take to get you off my back?”

The courtroom is silent again. Whatever words of defense that were uttered or might have been uttered seem pretty pathetic and woefully inadequate to answer the indictment of God: “*What have I done to you? In what have I wearied you?*” And then from the bench high above, far beyond our sight, comes a voice like that of a loving mother speaking to her disobedient child, leaving no room for argument: “He has told you, O mortal, what is good. What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?”

And the echoes of the rhythm of Oz return, chanting: justice and mercy and faith, oh my! What does God want from us? God wants us to **do** justice; not just discuss it or read about it or lament the lack of it, but to **do justice**! And God wants us to love *hesed,* a Hebrew word which is kindness and mercy and love and loyalty all wrapped into one; love kindness, love *hesed*, live in love. And God wants us to **walk humbly** with God day to day, walk with the kind of humility of which Jesus spoke, saying, “Deny yourself, take up your cross daily, and follow me!” and “Whoever would be first must be last of all and servant of all.” That is what the Lord requires of us: justice and mercy and a humble walk of faith – oh my! My oh my oh my!

***Do justice*** - when a majority of society is comfortable with injustice and injustice is dismissed as “just politics”! Do justice when it is neither popular nor easy! I am more of a passive person, Lord. Could I not just avoid injustice? Must I really DO justice? ***Love kindness and mercy*** – even when I have been badly wronged and my heart burns for revenge, or when kindness is expensive or inconvenient or humbling! Could I not just ***like*** kindness and mercy and compliment it when I see it in others? ***Walk humbly with God*** - when pride longs for the approval of my peers and humility is regarded as weakness, when I really want to see my face on the jumbotron, when temptation knocks at my ego’s door? Must I really walk humbly with God when I don’t like the path on which God is leading me and the road we are walking is lonely or dangerous and faith ebbs low! Must I walk with you, Lord, or might you walk with me on the path I choose! “No!” says Micah. “Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with your God.” That is what the Lord requires of you, asks of you, demands of you – of all of you – justice and mercy and humble faith. Oh my! It seems like a lot!

But that is what God has required of God’s people across the ages, and it is what God’s people have done through the ages – some better than others, none perfectly. It is what the saints who have gone before us have done, those through whom we have known the saving acts of the Lord, acts of justice and mercy and humble faith. It is what God does through them, because with God nothing is impossible. And if God can work through them, then perhaps God can work through us too, for like them we are the people of God, those with whom God walks day to day, those through whom God works day to day, those whom God saves, those whom Jesus calls disciples. What does God want from us – from you and from me? Justice and mercy and humble faith. “Is that really too much to ask?” says the Lord. What do you say? Amen