

“Offering What Needs to Be Given”

Scripture

Micah 6:1-8 (*The Message*)

¹Listen now, listen to God: "Take your stand in court. If you have a complaint, tell the mountains; make your case to the hills. ²And now, Mountains, hear God's case; listen, Jury Earth - For I am bringing charges against my people. I am building a case against Israel. ³"Dear people, how have I done you wrong? Have I burdened you, worn you out? Answer! ⁴I delivered you from a bad life in Egypt; I paid a good price to get you out of slavery. I sent Moses to lead you - and Aaron and Miriam to boot! ⁵Remember what Balak king of Moab tried to pull, and how Balaam son of Beor turned the tables on him. Remember all those stories about Shittim and Gilgal. Keep all God's salvation stories fresh and present."

⁶How can I stand up before God and show proper respect to the high God? Should I bring an armload of offerings topped off with yearling calves? ⁷Would God be impressed with thousands of rams, with buckets and barrels of olive oil? Would he be moved if I sacrificed my firstborn child, my precious baby, to cancel my sin? ⁸But he's already made it plain how to live, what to do, what God is looking for in men and women. It's quite simple: Do what is fair and just to your neighbor, be compassionate and loyal in your love, And don't take yourself too seriously - take God seriously.

Romans 12:1-2

¹So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life - your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life - and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. ²Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.

In a book written to develop a conversation between spiritual practice and theology, Eugene Peterson makes the statement that “sacrifice is at the center of the work of salvation.” He’s writing about the Lord’s Supper and how its remembrance of Jesus’ death should inform the manner by which we live. He might just as easily been writing about baptism, for it too is a remembrance of Jesus’ death and descent into the grave in the hopes of new life, resurrection life. People write about baptism, that this rite that we perform on little babies is supposed to affect the whole rest of their lives. In what way? Peterson says:

“There is only one Gospel way to participate in Jesus’ work – live a sacrificial life in Jesus’ name.”

I’m wondering how that strikes you. In attempting his “spiritual theology,” Peterson is putting this out there to contrast the kind of spirituality promoted in the New Age sections of the Borders Bookstore. “In the jargon of the day,” he says, “we pray: ‘sacrifice is not one of my gifts – I want to serve God with my strength, with my giftedness.’” Maybe sacrifice seems too stark to you, too violent, too easily making oneself susceptible to manipulation – exploitation, even. “Who’s asking me to sacrifice?”

When I read the first couple of verses from Romans 12, I have this kind of reaction. I read in the NRSV that Paul appeals to us, “brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship,” I want to quick look at the Greek or find a different translation that would soften this sacrificial language – put it into different terminology. “How about offer yourself,” Paul? What if we shared who we are and joined hands with our friends in Christ, sang Kum-ba-yah? Couldn’t that qualify as spiritual worship?

Of course, then there’s the left side of my brain which applauds the tough sacrificial talk. I remember having a job at a gas station when I was a teenager and coming home to report to my father what my day had been like. I had pumped gas with courtesy, drained oil from the pan while the car was up in the air on hydraulics, counted the money accurately. “Well, did you stand around sometimes?” my dad would ask. “A little.” “Well, just remember it’s the extra jobs that you do that will catch your boss’s eye and keep him happy with you.” Yes, Dad. Sacrifice is good. It’s getting dirt under your fingernails, oil in your pores, sweat on your brow, and proving yourself worthy.

Obligation and self-determination seem to be the poles we live within, to me. Doesn’t it to you? Yet, given the life-giving message of Jesus’ sacrifice, a resurrection purpose seen in his rising to new life, do you also wonder if there isn’t something between those two poles, something that can combine obligation and freedom, that would present a compelling way of life lived well? Actually, I think that is what Paul is after when he urges us as Christians to make ourselves “a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, our spiritual worship.” Like a mother offering her body as the womb and birth canal for a new human being to come into the world, or a friend laying down his life for the well-being of another, or that time where you kept your ego in check and another got credit for an accomplishment or succeeded in a goal or didn’t have to take the blame for a mistake – sacrifice can be a liberating act.

I am looking forward to staying with this theme over the course of several weeks ahead as we consider the good words of the Old Testament prophet,

Micah, who quite wonderfully asked: “What does the LORD require of us?” Instead of answering something like “big checks in the church offering plate” or “leaving family and home to travel to the other side of the world for missionary work,” Micah eloquently summarizes what is needful for us to offer as three things: “to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God.”

To frame this, I put the whole passage from Micah before you this week. Knowing that we have several attorneys in the congregation, I’m wondering if you caught that this is a lawsuit. God is calling the mountains and the earth to the witness stand to hear the evidence against God’s people. They are on trial for their waywardness – a good word, because the issue is that they have gone astray. They have gone astray from the relational and liberating way that they are to live together in the community of faith.

In the lawsuit, God begins the questioning by asking: “You were slaves in Egypt. Didn’t I free you from the cruelty of oppression, from a tyrant who sought to make himself a god by killing you, taking away your dignity, compelling your labor?” God cross examines: “Didn’t I put up with your backseat complaints on the way to a promised land of milk and honey? Didn’t I keep you safe from bandits along the way, and provide sandals for you to wear that did not wear out? And did I not give you a good way to live with one another, calling you to mutual respect, dignifying you with the title of children of God?”

In answering, Israel wants to be given a penance to perform. Aiming to stay clear of the covenantal relationship, Israel asks: “How can I pay you off, God, so that I don’t have to care?” What if I gave you a freezer full of steaks so you can throw yourself a party?” Or, “I’ve got access to valuable commodities: stocks, bonds, a little place up on the mountains with a great view.” “Or are you going to be mean God, and ask what you asked of Father Abraham, Isaac, the firstborn son?” That’s like accusing: “Are you another Pharaoh, wanting to kill all the boy babies?” What do you say to questions like that? “How long have you been stealing from the government?”

What God does in this lawsuit is answer God’s own question. What is it that the Lord requires of you? The answer is from the original hopes that God sought for this free people of Israel, that they would value mutual concern, equity and would be free of bargaining for God’s love. In talking about what it is to walk humbly with God, Walter Brueggemann said that we can look at this in two different ways. “The more obvious reading is that because God is so powerful, in God’s presence we must be humble. But one can also read that God’s own walk is humble, and so if one would walk the way of God, one must also walk humbly.” As I said before, I’m for the alternative reading.

Indeed, the question in the trial of Micah is not about who we are, it’s really about who God is. If God is just, if God loves kindness, if God walks

humbly, then the requirement that is necessary is fellowship with God, who loves a people, who offers his son as a freely extended sacrifice to us, and finds hope, life and glorious liberty in that. Defined in that way, if all of this works for God, maybe it can work in the way we live our lives, too.

Let's explore this in the coming weeks. Amen.