



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina
30 July 2017
Sermon: "Simple Acts"
Rev. Samantha Gonzalez-Block

Micah 6:1-8
Acts 8:26-40

Every morning as the sun rises, Timoteo begins his long ascent up the mountain by foot to his prized, closet-sized piece of farm land that looks over the city of San Miguel, Guatemala – the place he calls home. He has been making that journey up the mountain each day since he was nine years old, helping his father care for that cherished piece of land.

Now, nearly fifty years later, Timoteo leads the way, as ten youth and adults from our presbytery (myself included) breathe heavily and try to keep up.

As part of the Presbytery Youth Delegation to Guatemala this summer, I felt privileged to spend time with Timoteo. He is part of a coffee farming cooperative called "De La Gente." Through this organization, he and twelve other local farmers are able to no longer lean on big businesses, but instead work together to share resources and labor.

They can produce coffee that is ready to be bought and sold at home and abroad. And their direct profits have helped them keep their children in school – even put some of them through college – and most importantly, there is food on the table each night.

When we reached the top of the mountain, Timoteo didn't give us much time to catch our breath. He rolled up his sleeves and began to tell us all of the ins and outs of coffee farming: when the bean becomes red or yellow it is time for it to be picked, when the coffee plant turns seven it should be cut down to its stump, some shade is necessary for growth (but not too much), and so on and so forth.

Timoteo stuck a shovel deep into the ground and asked who was ready to dig a hole for a new coffee plant. One of our youth named Ben eagerly volunteered and Timoteo watched closely as Ben carefully pushed the shovel through the dirt. Next, Hannah stepped in and after about fifteen minutes, we had made a hole deep enough for Paige to place a new coffee plant in the ground.

"That was hard work!" shouted Max. "How many holes do you dig a day, Timoteo?"

"Oh, about two hundred."

Two hundred holes a day! For us, Timoteo's work felt impossibly strenuous, but for him, this was a simple task. He is accustomed to hard work because he has spent his life building the skills, the stamina, and the strength to do it well.

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Being a Christian is hard work.
And doing justice "in the name of God" is no simple task.

As I look around the room today, I am reminded that as a congregation we feel especially drawn to justice work. We use our garden as a source of nourishment for those in need; we open our church doors to twelve women seeking shelter; we get out and get moving in our community (cleaning up the river, building relationships); we try to create a worship environment where all feel welcome as they are.

It is exciting to experience so many shovels digging deep into the dirt.
And yet today's passage forces us to think critically and prayerfully about our approach to "doing justice."

Surely, caring for those in need and speaking out for the marginalized are Christ's work, but Micah reminds us that we cannot even attempt to "do justice" until we place it alongside "loving kindness" and "walking humbly with our God".

Now, I don't know about you, but kindness and humility are not necessarily the first words that come to mind when I think about diving into justice work. I mean, come on, I went to Union Seminary in New York City. When I think justice, I think late night marches, sit ins, holding signs, chanting with a crowd. And I'm not the only one. Many pastors who preach on this text stop right after Micah calls us to "do justice" (they don't even touch the rest of the passage).

Why would Micah, why would God, set justice, kindness and humility alongside one another and require us to embrace them all – all at once?

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Now, we meet Micah during a very precarious time in the lives of our Biblical ancestors. Imagine a serious courtroom drama (*the people vs. God*). Israel is being charged with slacking in their faith – no longer praising God with their full hearts, souls, and minds, no longer turning to their Creator for guidance and comfort as they navigate a difficult and divided world.

God is furious and declares that they have broken their covenant promise. They have forgotten all that God has done to free them, and all that God is doing to protect and care for them now.

The people try to quickly settle this dispute. They present God with beautiful burnt offerings and even human sacrifices, but the Lord is not easily swayed (in fact, this causes even more friction).

Finally, God silences the room and reminds them that what is required is not grand gestures done without thinking, but three simple acts done with mindfulness and devotion:
do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God.

God declares that these three words need one another – just as God’s people need God. Even more, they are dependent on one another in order to really flourish.

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What does it mean to love kindness?

When I think kindness, I am reminded of one of my favorite songs by Nancy Lamott called, “We Can Be Kind.” The chorus goes like this:

*“We can be kind, we can take care of each other,
we can remember that deep down inside we all need to same thing
and maybe we’ll find that if we are there for each other
that together we’ll weather whatever tomorrow may bring.”ⁱ*

I think we can agree that kindness is in very short supply these days in our culture. It isn’t valued as it should be and it isn’t always easy to find.

Nancy Lamott’s hopeful melody and Micah’s words call us to embody a deeper understanding of kindness. Kindness is more than “being a nice person”: it is a radical, transformative gift - to be sure, it is a springboard for justice.

To love kindness is to recognize our shared humanity and divinity, to listen with empathy to the pain of the marginalized, to invite the stranger in, to open ourselves up to being changed and awakened to something new.

It is building steadfast relationships - with God and with one another - that are *free* from manipulation and selfishness; and instead, are *filled* with mutual respect and a shared desire to achieve peace and harmony.

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Many of you have asked me about our recent visit to Guatemala, and as I reflect on this trip, “kindness” is a word that certainly stands out.

I witnessed “loving kindness” through Margoth, a single mother who lent us her entire home to stay in. With just a few mattresses on the floor and a bucket of cold water to bathe - this was all that she had and she gave it all to us.

I was taken aback by “kindness” when our sister church (Iglesia Jerusalem) in Coatepeque asked about so many members of our congregation *by name* - reminding me that despite the distance they have been steadily praying for each of us and they have been needing our prayers as well.

And we see “loving kindness” here among us too: through the many intergenerational connections that are made through Sunday School, youth group and worship, through visits with our homebound members, through our shared singing (no matter how *iffy* our harmonies sometimes), and through the smiles and hugs exchanged in the narthex.

“Loving kindness” means letting God and one another expand our imaginations and take us to new, joyful, unexpected, even hard and difficult places.

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What does it mean to walk humbly?

In our society, humility is rarely something that is rewarded. Let’s face it, our political leaders spend much of their time talking over each other, our athletes try to intimidate their opponents before the big game, our students are pushed to be the very best in the class. We see humility as synonymous with weakness - not a virtue that will get you very far in this world.

Yet this morning’s passage once again flips our reality upside down: telling us that walking humbly is a requirement from God that paves the way for justice work to begin.

To be *humble* then, in God’s eyes, must mean something more. In Eugene Peterson’s “The Message,” he translates God’s requirement for us to “walk humbly” as: “don’t take yourself too seriously, take God seriously.”ⁱⁱ

Essentially, put your guard down, so that the Spirit can lead the way. Reorder your priorities, so that God can come first. Walk humbly by setting aside your doubts, pride and prejudices, and opening yourself up to unexpected courage and new connections, and to a God who is our touchstone, our guide, and our purpose.

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While guest preaching at a church in the Midwest, Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor offered a sermon where she shared her belief that lay leaders are God’s best hope for healing the world. She expressed that as baptized members of Christ’s family, God depends on each of us to be attentive to God’s voice – ready to go wherever it leads, and ready to assist in God’s holy, hard work.

After the worship service, a deacon named Marie approached Barbara and said, “Thanks for your encouragement, but I don’t know if I am interested in God depending in me that much. I don’t think I want to be that important.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Marie didn’t feel ready to “walk humbly” with God because she was too afraid of where it might take her. But we know that if we truly take in Micah’s words, then we cannot hesitate to follow God no matter the cost and no matter wherever it leads. Surely, as Christians we are aware that God will guide us towards the places that are the most broken – where there is great hunger for hope and repair.

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So, we “love kindness” and we “walk humbly” and then finally, we arrive at justice.

I love this word *justice* because it is an action word – it gets us to our feet, it calls us to start moving, it brings us to mindful stillness, it empowers us to speak out in full voices, it emboldens us to pray without ceasing.

To “do justice” is to actively work together for the fairness and equality of all of God’s people, especially those most exploited and powerless. And how incredible, God calls us to this hard and essential work, with a spirit of kindness and humility.

It is surely far from easy, but I wonder what it would look like for all of us to really do justice while loving kindness. I wonder what difference it would make to do justice while walking humbly with God.

These three requirements depend on one another, inform one another – truly they are three in one. And we cannot do any of them well, we cannot do God’s work well, until we embody them all *together*.

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One evening in Guatemala, after a long day of talking about how to build bridges together with our sisters and brothers of Suchi presbytery, dinner was ready to be served outside in the open air. Out of nowhere, it began to rain heavily.

Everyone rushed outside to grab bowls of taquitos and rice, and chairs and plates and brought everything back into the sanctuary. Within minutes, the food was placed atop the communion table and the chancel became a buffet line. People sat together on the floor, at folding tables, wherever they could - scattered throughout the sacred sanctuary space.

It was pure, perfect chaos: rice falling on the floor, laughter and stories being shared in different languages, even an arm wrestling competition took place.

Paige Kemper said that it felt like we were having Communion together - Christ seemed present in the rich food and conversation.

For me, it was a holy Micah moment.

The sanctuary was being used as it should: as a place to express kindness and generosity, as a place to strategize about social justice and community building, as a place to remind us to not take ourselves, or even this room, too seriously – but to take God seriously above all.

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Friends, our world is aching for justice and for “doers of justice.” And our faith inspires us to get moving. But we must remember that before we can pick up our shovel, before we can reach out our hand, before we can charge forward, we must first turn to God and ask what is required of us.

There are only three simple things.

And they are equally balanced, dependent on each other.

Without one, we cannot really get started on any.

With them all, God can lead us towards world-changing transformation.

Do justice.

Love kindness.

Walk humbly with your God.

There is much to do. Let's get to work.

ⁱ Nancy Lamott. “We Can Be Kind.” *Listen to My Heart*. Midder Music Label. 1999.

ⁱⁱ ~~https://www.petersen.com/the-don-swagch-penn-718-88-dam~~ *Contemporary Language*. Colorado: NavPress, 2003. p. 1690

ⁱⁱⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor. *The Preaching Life*. Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1993. p. 27-29