

**Covenant or Commodity?**  
**A Sermon by Louise Westfall**  
**Fairmount Presbyterian Church**  
**Cleveland Heights, Ohio**  
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**Text: Micah 6:1-8**

The text from the Hebrew Scriptures reads like a criminal justice drama, ripped from the pages of *Law and Order* scripts. The prophet casts God in the role of public prosecutor, bringing charges against God's covenant people. The people have allegedly forgotten God, gone their own way, and transgressed God's holy law. The charges concern spiritual and material matters, because the law the people have transgressed was fundamental to the covenant: governance with justice and equity, sharing the abundance of the land, caring for widow and orphan and refugee living within their borders. Instead, the prophet cries: *...they covet fields and seize them; houses, and take them away; they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance...* Their rulers "abhor justice and pervert all equity." Even the priests and religious leaders have sinned, betraying the truth to please the congregation, and leading the nation astray. In the morning text, God appears as both prosecuting attorney and complainant, seeking answers and calling the people to explain their behavior.

How do the people respond? What do they offer as testimony? They resort to the time-honored technique of deflection: they counter God's questions with their own. Anyone who has a teenager has experienced this tactic. *What parents are going to be at the party? When are you going to stop treating me like a child?* Here, the people suggest that God has obscured the way, and they are left to figure out just what God does expect from them.

And what *does* God require of us? Listen for God's word to us in the reading from the book of the prophet Micah, in the sixth chapter at the first verse. [Micah 6:1-8]

Always eager to learn "best practices" in the challenging world of church growth, while in Florida recently, I attended Daytona Beach's "drive-in church." In 1953, a congregation bought a closed drive-in movie theatre and modified it to become a church. Now in the relative comfort of your automobile, you can sip your coffee and by tuning your radio dial to 88.9, listen to a worship service being conducted in the building in front of you. As you pull in, an usher hands you a bulletin and a little shrink-wrapped cup of grape juice and chiclet-sized piece of bread (sort of the fast-food version of communion?).

You can sing along on the hymns if you like, without worrying about your skill or the reactions of those around you. There's even a choir, and after their number, people honked their horns to signal their appreciation. And, there's no passing the peace!—unless you want to of course, with just those presumably known to you sitting with you in the car. The sermon the day I attended was slow enough to allow a running commentary in our car, without disturbing either the preacher or fellow worshipers. You can probably tell I didn't think much of it, although my friends and fellow Fairmount members pointed out that according to the bulletin the previous week's worship attendance had been over 700. Drive-in church—who knew?

Far be it from me to criticize just about any technique that makes worship more accessible and desirable to contemporary folk. But I don't know—drive-in church seemed maybe only one degree more demanding than tuning in to the "hour of power" and watching worship on TV. You do have to drive there, but the passivity it engenders flies in the face of biblical faith which is characterized by action, movement, growth.

In contrast, the text from Micah offers three words—three *verbs*, actually, to describe spiritual practice. "Do." "Love." "Walk." Nothing passive there. Action is not simply the outcome of faith; it is its very substance. The Judeo-Christian faith invites us not merely to a way of thinking, but a way of going. A walking life you could say. One step followed by another and another. Something we do partly under our own power—whether we stride or run or limp or roll along in a walker or wheelchair. Walking takes us places. Sometimes it's done on a sidewalk or a well-marked trail. Other times we have to find a path or make one. We might have to ask for directions or consult street signs or maps. And sometimes we have to backtrack because we missed the turn, or got going in the wrong direction. Walking strengthens the heart and clears the mind. You can walk with purpose, in a straight line to reach your destination. Or you can amble, stopping to "smell the roses" or gaze at the moon. Both have their appeal.

During Jesus' earthly ministry, his most common invitation was not, as we might assume, "Believe in me!" -- instead, it was "Follow me!" (Which may explain why his first disciples were not called "Followers of the Doctrine" but rather, "Followers of the Way") [I am indebted to Rosemary Mitchell and Gail Ricculti for this insight from their book, *Birthings and Blessings*.] What always amazes me about those early followers is how little they knew of the way when they agreed to start walking. They couldn't have imagined the places they'd go, the people they'd encounter, the dangers they would face, not to mention the shadow of the cross dominating the path.

But somehow they found the courage to take that first step. And then another, and another. It's almost as if they didn't know the way *until* they walked.

Similarly, the text from Micah doesn't so much lay out a path as it does a way of walking. And note the contrast between the people's expectation of God's demands, and what God actually does require. They suggest that it's a matter of performing your religious duty. Make those offerings, write those checks, be regular in your worship attendance. In fact, do MORE than the minimum: don't just offer one ram, give a thousand. The implication is that it's hard to please God. But then the words of the prophet challenge that viewpoint, reminding the people that it's not ritual duty that pleases God, but acts of justice and kindness, done in the context of a daily walk with God. "Walking humbly" is not one more "duty" God requires, but is rather an invitation to relationship---to walk *with* God, to choose the way blazed by our divine companion and the One who has chosen to walk with us.

Faith, understand, is not a "thing," a commodity we can acquire and amass, part of our bank of spiritual assets. It is a relationship with God who loves and saves us; the God who calls us to join the covenant community of people who are not perfect, who are not necessarily even very spiritual, but who have decided to walk humbly with God.

I learned only recently that the Hebrew word for "walking" is the same word for "ethics," and that correspondence helps make the connection for our lives. Walking with God teaches us how to act with justice and kindness. Gives us the moral courage to see the truth about our lives, about the unrighteous inequities that characterize the world, and strengthens our will to change them. To DO justice in a society with a rapidly-widening gap between poor and rich, to ACT with compassion towards those in need. For citizens of the richest nation in the world, and residents of the metropolitan area deemed the poorest in that nation, I can think of no more important work than to address the grave injustices in our social and economic order. Just this past week I learned that fully one-third of the trillion-dollar deficit in our country's budget can be accounted for by tax cuts to the richest 10% of our population. Something is wrong with that. If you're not sure how to "do justice" amid realities like that, join the efforts of the Northeast Ohio Alliance for Hope, a faith-based organization that helps empower citizens for system-changing action. It's holy work, and it's also good citizenship. No less prominent a jurist than the late Supreme Court justice Louis Brandeis noted, "We can have a democracy or we can have great wealth concentrated in the hands of the few.

We cannot have both.” [quoted in *Credo*, by William Sloan Coffin, p. 47]  
What does the Lord require of us?

One more thing about the walking life: don't go it alone. I power walk every day for exercise. Theoretically. That is, I made a commitment to better health a few years ago and took up walking. But when the alarm goes off and its cold and dark, often the only thing that enables me to make good on my commitment is the knowledge that there, at the rec center or outside my side door, will be a friend who has also chosen to walk. The Church – the universal Body of Christ in every time and place—no less than the beloved Fairmount family, is the covenant community of walkers, friends with whom we are joined to journey this life of faith. We can help one another walk humbly with God; we can support one another when the way seems hard, the road long, and the path uncertain; we can encourage one another to make good on our commitment to follow where Christ leads. We are visible evidence of an invisible grace, the power of God who keeps covenant with us, come what may.

What does the Lord require of us? *To do justice, to love kindness, to walk humbly with God.* It's more than a drive-in duty; it's an invitation to a lifetime of joyful journeying. May God grant us faith to walk with courage, not always knowing where we go, but trusting that God's hand is leading us, and God's love is supporting us.....all the way. Friends, put on your walking shoes, stretch those muscles and let's get going!

**TO THE GOD OF ALL GRACE WHO CALLS US TO SHARE GOD'S  
ETERNAL GLORY IN UNION WITH JESUS CHRIST, BE THE POWER  
FOREVER. AMEN.**

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