



Walk Humbly With Your God

Acts 4:32-37

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Over the past couple months, we've been looking at how a person of faith should understand Micah's prophecy of guidance to Israel in Micah 6:8. Micah is addressing a nation on the verge of total exile. They are soon to be swept up, taken over through militaristic conquest by the Babylonians, and led into exile away from the homes – in many cases, splitting family from one another, and each from their homesteads. Micah names, on God's behalf, that this exile will be the result of their failed faithfulness. While God has remained steadfast to the covenant, the people of God have turned away. They have leaders who have sought personal glory over faithful governance, and the people have failed to maintain the commandment of God.

Micah gives them hope, naming that there is a way to avoid the impending exile. They need to simply follow God's instructions, which Micah simplifies into three concise actions: do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.

I believe we too are at the precipice of such a moment in history. We are in this liminal period of time where God is thundering from the heavens for us to listen to Micah once again. The world is crumbling around us – literal buildings being burned to the ground – hundreds of thousands of lives being taken by a preventable disease – and Micah maintains this offering of assurance: you know what the Lord has required of you. Do you not hear God? Do justice. Love mercy. And walk humbly with your God.

We talked about Biblical justice, and what it means to share in the work of God in raising up the low and bringing down the high, such that all of God's created might have an equal footing to live into God's desire of abundant life for all of creation.

We talked about Biblical mercy, and what it means to love mercy in the way of Christ – to actively participate in shifting, or giving up power, so that all of God's created might have new life, being freed from the bondage of debt, poverty, and fear.

Last week, we talked about the Biblical witness of humility, and how we are invited to understand humility as a state of readiness to hear what God desires of us, God's created. And not just a state of readiness, but a state of willingness to respond when God calls.

Today, we look at what it means to *walk* humbly – to walk in such a state of readiness and willingness – with God.

As we named last week, humility is a willingness to put one's own agenda on hold for the purpose of the agenda of another. It is the holding off of one's personal desires for the sake of implementing

another's desires. It is the deliberate lack of action in anticipation of the advisement to action from another.

And though it perhaps doesn't need to be named, for the sake of clarity, as Micah is instructing us, we are not invited to walk humbly with our spouse, or our boss, or our neighbor, or our Senator, or our President – we are asked to walk humbly with our God. The person whose advisement, whose desires, and whose agenda we are to wait upon is that of God.

And, because God's Word works in this way, we have example after example of what this looks like in the New Testament. Consider these stories:

In Luke 1, we are told that “the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph. Her name was Mary. The angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, for you have found favor with God. You will conceive a son, and you will name him Jesus.’” Immediately, Mary was unsure how this could be, but the angel affirmed, “‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the child to be born will be holy; he will be called the Son of God.’ ... Then Mary said, ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be according to your word.’”

Mary had a million reasons to dislike this plan. She was betrothed, soon to be wed. This news could wreck that marriage. This news could get her killed. This news could be the ruin for not just her life, but for the family name. It could ruin the image of her family in the community. And yet, Mary submitted to the will of God. She exemplified what it means to walk humbly with God – not asking Gabriel to come back in a year or two after the marriage was confirmed, or when their family planning proved a readiness for a child. She put her desires and agenda on hold so that she might respond to God's desires and agenda. She walked humbly with her God.

Consider again, in Luke 5, we are told that Jesus came to the lake of Gennesaret where he boarded the fishing boat of Simon, who set off from shore. After teaching the crowd still gathered on the shore from the boat, Jesus turned to Simon, instructing him to set out to deeper water to fish. Simon acknowledges Jesus as *Master*, saying, “Master, we've been at this all night and we've caught nothing. But if you say so, I'll try it.” In doing so, Simon caught a haul of fish that was so great, it was breaking the nets and *sinking both his boat and another boat he called over for help*. This was no small catch.

In and of itself, this story shows a level of humility. I'm sure Simon wasn't used to taking fishing instructions from a rabbi, but he follows the lead of Jesus. But honestly, this isn't the greatest of witness of humility in this story. *After* catching this haul of fish that was so great it was sinking their boats, Jesus said to Simon, and also James and John, who were on the boat with Simon, that they were to follow him and become fishers of men.

This crew of fishermen has just caught the largest haul of fish a boat crew could ever imagine catching. The bank they would have made on that haul of fish could have set them up for a life-time of luxury. It's like the Bubba Gump Shrimp Company after all the other boats were wrecked in the hurricane, they could have monopolized the fish market in the port. And yet, before they even cashed in the haul of

fish, they left everything behind and followed Jesus. They left behind their desires, their families, their businesses, their catch of fish and its financial security all for the will and invitation of Jesus.

Consider again, Luke 9, in the story of the feeding of the masses. The crowds had followed Jesus and the disciples to Bethsaida. As the day was coming to a close, the disciples became worried, for the crowd would be hungry. Jesus instructed the disciples to feed the crowds. The disciples respond to Jesus' instruction with this worried fear, "We have no more than five loaves of bread and two fish." There's a clear concern that they do not have enough to feed everyone, and there's an implied concern that, should they attempt to use what they have to feed the others, they would not have enough to feed themselves. And yet, at Jesus' request, the disciples gave Jesus what they had, and having blessed the food and broken the bread, (we know the story) the limited amount they had to offer proved sufficient to satiate the entire crowd, which numbered in the thousands of people.

Though they had concern for themselves, and perhaps a genuine concern for the well-being of the crowds, the disciples submitted to the invitation of Christ. They gave what they had, humbling themselves and their desires to the invitation and will of God. Lo, and behold, not only were they cared for, but so were the masses who had gathered.

Finally, consider the prayer of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night he was betrayed. Jesus had known for some time that his ministry and call as the incarnate Lord would lead him to his death in Jerusalem. And yet, even as he had exemplified walking humbly with God, he found himself praying in the garden a prayer of escape. In Luke 22, Jesus begs of God, "If you are willing, remove this cup from me." Jesus wanted a way out; he knew what was to happen should he continue to submit to God. And yet, his prayer continues, "yet, not my will but yours be done."

This is the prayer of humility – "not my will but yours be done."

Admittedly, this prayer is a prayer of idealism. It assumes one can distinctly determine God's will from the many false claims about God's will. The invitation to humility, to walk humbly with God, becomes a bit more challenging when you have preachers on opposite corners of the street, using their bullhorns to claim God's will is different from one another. How do we best understand, or how do we best interpret God's will amidst all the chatter and noise?

Let us remember, Micah's instruction is three fold. Walking humbly with God cannot stand isolated from the call to do justice and love mercy. These three invitations merge as one in our call to faithfulness.

To offer a bit of clarity, let us look at our text today, which Tracy read, from Acts 4.

Acts provides for us the earliest testimony of the Christian Church, providing for us both the good and the bad. Earlier in chapter 4, the leaders in Jerusalem had arrested Peter and John for proclaiming Jesus' resurrection. The early church was forced to form their own identity, their new identity in Christ, amidst the structures and powers and leaders of the historic faith of the Jewish community. This old framework is then juxtaposed to the witness of the new community, described in verses 32-37.

Verse 32 begins, “The whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.” This text has become a complicated one in our modern capitalistic nation, as some have used this text to argue for a vision of socialism as the desire for any Christian nation. Perhaps there’s something to this socialistic ideal – but notice, the text isn’t naming any governmental powers that were forcing shared ownership. As we read verse 33, we find, “The fact of common possessions has less to do with some chosen system of economics than with the appropriate response to the power of the resurrection of Jesus. The apostles hold all their goods in common so as to better witness to the resurrection of the one they called Lord.”ⁱ

Because of their shared work, and shared ownership, verse 34 says, “there was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold.” ... I’ve always thought this text was interesting, because it seems to speak against even Jesus’s proclamation in Matthew 26:11, which offers, “You will always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me.” It seems when we humble ourselves for the health of the greater community’s well-being, perhaps in a vision of God’s ideal witness, there aren’t poor among us – there were none who had need.

Going back to the connecting points of Micah’s three instructions, in a witness of what it means to walk humbly with God, the work of doing justice seems to flow naturally in the walk of humility. The low – the poor, or those with need – are lifted up, so that none have need. And this is made possible because the high – the wealthy, or those with abundance – give of their excess. This is the work of doing justice, as defined throughout the Biblical text. And it fits the ideal of walking humbly with God, where your desires, your wealth, your abundance takes a back seat to God’s greater desire, of a healthy and just world where no one wanders in want or need.

The church does kick out the poor, or the homeless, or the weak because they can’t provide as much for the community. Instead, the church cares for the poor, the homeless, and the weak, by utilizing the excess of resources among the wealthy to care for the poor. This is not only a witness of walking humbly with God, but it is a witness of doing justice, and together, this creates a more God-willed vision of community.

Verse 35 further names, the excess wealth was laid at the apostle’s feet, so it might be distributed to those in need. This is a witness of loving mercy. In the act of giving up control over the wealth; the wealthy were giving up their power over their wealth. There was no instructions offered by the giver on how the funds were to be used. The money wasn’t put into a piano fund, or the pew restoration fund. The money was laid, no strings attached, at the feet of the apostles. Again, a humble witness of giving up one’s personal desires, one’s personal thoughts, and one’s personal powers, so that God’s greater will might be accomplished. To love mercy, to enact mercy, is to demonstrate an intentional shifting, or vacating of one’s personal power for the greater will of God amidst creation.

It is clear in our United Statesian witness, that there are competing voices claiming to know exactly what God wants for you. There’s a wildly broad claim on God’s intent and God’s will for you and for

this nation. If I'm being fully honest, I'm not sure I know exactly what God wants for us. I'm not sure I can say "here is the perfect candidate for president," or "here is the right public policy," or "here is the right tax reform to solve our problems."

But when I look at what Micah is offering, when I look at these three instructions of Micah in tandem with one another to a disobedient nation, it seems the three are intended to go hand in hand and cannot to be isolated from one another. And it seems that in tandem, these three direct us, even today, to the full will of the one who is Lord and Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. In this way, one can ask about any political candidate, one can ask about any public policy, and one can ask about any reform or restructuring: Does this lead to justice? Does this reveal mercy? Is this a vote or act from a place of humility, or a place of personal insistence?

When you're making decisions within your own household, when you're making decisions within your HOA, when you're speaking up at City Council meetings, or when you're engaging in the church or the community, is your voice one that is seeking to maintain power for yourself? Is your hope to maintain and retain power within your little corner of the world? Is your desire to shut out the poor, to sweep the suburbs of those who don't look or speak like you? Is your hope to focus solely on the property value of your .23 acres of land, or your 2000 sq. ft. abode?

Because it seems that what Micah is calling us to, it seems the invitation to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God, invites us to something far greater than our limited minds even have the capacity to understand. It seems this is work we cannot do on our own. It seems our trials and tribulations will only get worse if we continue to pervert God's word to maintain power in our corner, or conserve control in our voting block, or to think we are sufficient in God's eyes on our own.

The work of God is not about you and me, it's not even about Washington Street UMC (in isolation), it's not about maintaining a false ideal as if we are as perfect as God could ever want us to be. The work of God is about a continual invitation to see the love of God as always greater than we are ready to show, the mercy of God is always more present than we are prepared to receive, and the justice of God is always more equitable than we have the capacity to create.

And yet, ill prepared as we may be, the invitation remains. Micah's invitation still rings true. The covenant remains intact. And we, you and me, our community – this community – we continue to show up. We continue to proclaim the goodness of God. We continue, because God continues, to ensure God's love is made known for all. Let us continue in this endeavor, as together we seek to be faithful to God's will, which has been laid out for us: do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.

ⁱ John Holbert. *Holding All Things in Common: Reflection on Acts 4:32-35*. April 8, 2012. <https://www.patheos.com/progressive-christian/holding-all-things-in-common-john-holbert-04-09-2012>. Retrieved October 20, 2020.