2/15-16/20 What God is Looking For Rev. Amy Haines

Micah 6:1-8

Every Valentine’s Day, the lists invariably pop up. The Best Gifts for Him. The Best Gifts for Her. The Best Gifts for Valentine’s Day if you are dating. The Best Gifts for Valentine’s Day if you are married. The anti-Valentine’s Day lists. Most years, I just ignore the lists.

Yet this year, I came across a new list. At least, it’s new to me. It appears to have been around for a few years now. What is that list? --- Valentine Week!

Beginning February 7th, each day in the week leading up to Valentine’s Day now has a theme:

Rose Day, Propose Day, Chocolate Day, Teddy Bear Day, Promise Day, Hug Day, Kiss Day, then finally Valentine’s Day!

-thevalentineweeklist.com

I think some company was looking for more ways to boost spending this week. I doubt if most couples are looking for more pressure on how to rightly spend their time together this week. Or their money. And this list is definitely not what God is looking for in the ways we spend our time and money, even as we honor those we love.

Advertising tries to tell us how to spend our time and our money. Society tries to pressure us into what we ought to care about, or what we ought to ignore. Family and friends are often a big influence in what we think and how we act. Daily, we have many voices competing for our attention, with differing expectations for our lives.

Then we open up God’s Word. And find that God’s ways are not the world’s ways.

We might be content with how we live at home and at work. We might be content with our safe bubble of close friends. We might be content with only reflecting on our faith 1-2 hours a week.

Then we open up God’s Word. And God invites us to a different way of living.

God invites us beyond our lists and checklists to a relationship with God and the world around us. This relationship then influences how we act, how we think, and what we believe. This relationship calls us to love God and love neighbor. This relationship moves us beyond faith to faithful living.

Today, our invitation to a relationship with God comes from the prophet Micah.

Micah was a contemporary to Isaiah and Hosea, proclaiming God’s word and warning to the southern kingdom of Judah in the 8th century BCE. The kingdom of Israel had already been exiled by the Assyrians, and soon Judah would be exiled by the Babylonians.

Unlike Micah and Isaiah, many Jewish leaders were still emphasizing that all was right in the world, if only the people of God would follow the rituals of faith. Yet Micah knew that rituals did not necessarily equal religion. The people of God may have been going through the motions of faith, yet they were also seeking to emulate the selfish ways of their neighbors rather than the compassionate ways of God.

Yet God being God, God was still not giving up on God’s people. Through the prophet Micah, God called God’s people to account for their wayward ways.

Micah chapter 6 is a court case, where God is the judge, the people of Israel are on trial, and the mountains and hills are the jury.

The implicit charge against Israel is that they have grown weary of God and God’s ways and chosen to go their own way.

While God asks the question why, God does not expect an honest response. That would be like a parent asking a child why they did something, and expecting a logical answer instead of a shrug of the shoulders and an “I don’t know.”

God asks rhetorically,

“My people, what did I ever do to you? How have I wearied you? What have I done to lead you to separate yourselves from me? How have I let you down?”

God then offers a history lesson of God’s many saving acts. God brought God’s people ought of slavery in Egypt, and offered not only freedom but also leaders through the Exodus. This is a foundational event in the faith lives of the Jewish people. God also rescued God’s people when King Balak of Moab threatened their existence and Balaam was only able to offer blessings on Israel. God was with God’s people as they crossed the River Jordan into the Promised Land, moving from Shittim to Gilgal. In remembering this move God’s people remembered God’s faithfulness to God’s promises. Many are the righteous, saving acts of the Lord.

Today, we are to remember not only these stories of God’s faithfulness to our ancestors, but also the greatest story of God’s salvation, the offering of God’s Son on the cross for our salvation. Through Jesus our sins are forgiven. It was Jesus’ love that cleanses us from sin.

Yet, how often do we follow in the footsteps of our faith ancestors, and find ourselves straying away from God’s mighty acts of salvation, straying away from giving thanks for Jesus, straying away from responding to God’s faithfulness with our faith?

Like our faith ancestors, we often don’t have any defense, nor any valid reason, why we turn away from God’s ways to follow the world’s ways. We can offer excuses as to why we don’t want to get to know our neighbors or why we put sports ahead of church, or why we live

by division rather than unity, or why we find time for social media ahead of prayer. We can offer excuses, but often not valid reasons.

So often we echo our ancestors in responding to God’s question with our question,

“Now what can I do to show proper respect to God? What can I do to show my allegiance once again to God? What can I do to earn my salvation?”

Israel saw the solution to God’s case as more ritual, more offering, more sacrifice. And their response goes from poor to costly to extreme, from a few yearling calves to thousands of rams to rivers of oil to the forbidden sacrifice of the firstborn son.

We may respond today with a promise to be nicer to our mean boss, or to be more tolerant of the noisy neighbor, or bargain with God by pledging to attend worship every Sunday, or to give more generously if God would bless us.

Thankfully, Micah reminds us that our salvation is not in our sacrifices and offerings and bargains with God. Religion and ritual have their place but cannot be the foundation for faith.

Our foundation of faith is a relationship with God, through our faith in Christ Jesus. In that relationship, God wants our faithful living as a response to God’s saving acts. Jesus already paid the price for our sins. We cannot earn our salvation. God loves us no matter what we do, yet calls us to respond to God’s love with our love.

So how do we respond? Micah 6:8 proclaims:

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;  
    and what does the Lord require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
    and to walk humbly with your God. (NRSV)

[God’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. (MSG)

Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with your God.

Micah in the 8th century BCE foreshadowed the words of Jesus in the 1st century CE

when Jesus declared:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul

and with all your mind and with all your strength.

…[and] Love your neighbor as yourself. (taken from Mk 12:28-31)

Do what is fair and just to your neighbor. Be compassionate and loyal in your love.  
Take God seriously.

We know these words. We’ve heard and even sung these words. So how do we live them, in response to God’s saving acts though Jesus?

..First, we recognize that the word require, *dasrash*, is not like a teacher requiring homework or a judge requiring punishment. Instead, d*arash* is the way a child requires its mother’s love, a flower requires sunshine, a lover requires the beloved’s presence. It is the requirement of relationship rather than demand.

--adapted from James Howell “Weekly Preaching” 2-2-20 ministrymatters.com

So what Micah calls us to is not another checklist or another way of right living. Micah calls us to relationships with God and others that include justice, kindness, and humility.

#1- Do Justice…

First please notice the word “do.” It is one thing to support missions financially; it is another thing entirely to do hands-on missions that is more justice than charity oriented. Charity is when we give; justice is when we address the cycles and systems behind the need that our charity is serving. So more than merely collecting food for a food pantry, how are we addressing healthy eating, simple cooking, and the underlying causes of hunger around us? How are we best distributing our excess food to those most in need?

I appreciate the ministry of IHN, Interfaith Hospitality Network. While we may feel like we’re only offering a warm meal and a welcoming place to sleep, IHN also seeks to assist its clients in breaking the cycles of poverty and homelessness through its high standards and encouraging education.

*Mishpat*, God’s justice is not so much about judgment as it is about grace, making sure all are at the table and all have an opportunity to be heard. God’s justice is about fairness, equality, and sharing in community more than it is about our need for vengeance, survival or our individual desires. God’s justice is care for the poorest and most vulnerable among us.

Paul Tillich once said that “Justice is the backbone of love.”

We cannot love someone unless we are acting in justice and kindness towards them.

--Adapted from Daniel Manastireanu, "Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly,"

Daniel's Think Tank Website, January 30, 2011, dmthinktank.wordpress.com

In “System Requirements” 2-2-14 Homileticsonline.org

Justice and Kindness go hand in hand.

#2- Love Kindness…

..The Hebrew word translated as kindness is *hesed*, meaning steadfast love, loyalty and faithfulness. *Hesed* lies at the heart of healthy relationships, whether the bonds are marriages, close friendships or the relationship between God and his people.

We are to love kindness. To not simply practice kindness, but to appreciate the kindness we are doing. To not merely say a helpful word, but to mean what we say.

Lois Tverberg in *Our Rabbi Jesus* writes:

"*Hesed* is a bone-weary father who drives through the night to bail his drug-addict son out of jail. *Hesed* is a mom who spends day after thankless day spoon-feeding and wiping up after a disabled child. *Hesed* is an unsung pastor's wife whose long-suffering, tearful prayers keep her exhausted husband from falling apart at the seams. *Hesed* is love that can be counted on, decade after decade."

--“System Requirements” 2-2-14 Homileticsonline.org

Justice and kindness are powerful ways of loving our neighbor and caring for those around us.

Yet they must be grounded in our love of God.

We won’t be able to show loving kindness unless we have experienced God’s steadfast loving kindness. We won’t know what justice is apart from God’s justice. God will keep us from being too hard with justice and too soft with loving kindness.

#3- Walk Humbly…

Anything we do in the name of Jesus ought to come from a heart or hearts that attentively and alertly journeys with Jesus. This journey is not a sprint, nor is it even a race. Rather, our faith journeys are never ending journeys that may have its highs and lows but in the midst of it all, find that God is there. To walk humbly with God reminds us that life is not all about us. We are called to be obedient to God’s call in our lives.

..William Temple once said,

"Humility does not mean thinking less of yourself than of other people, nor does it mean having a low opinion of your own gifts. It means freedom from thinking about yourself one way or the other at all."

--William Temple, "Christ in His Church" in Today in the Word,

April 3, 1992. Sermonillustrations.com: humility

..Samuel Morse was once asked if he ever encountered situations where he didn't know what to do.

Morse responded,

"More than once, and whenever I could not see my way clearly, I knelt down and prayed to God for light and understanding."

Morse received many honors from his invention of the telegraph but felt undeserving:

"I have made a valuable application of electricity not because I was superior to other men but solely because God, who meant it for mankind, must reveal it to someone and He was pleased to reveal it to me."

--Tim Hansel, Eating Problems for Breakfast, Word Publishing, 1988, pp. 33-34. Sermonillustrations.com: humility

Walking humbly with our God is acknowledging who God is and who we are, and that we are saved through faith only by the grace of God. The only way we live by justice and kindness, by love and mercy, is because of God’s presence in our lives.

The more we walk humbly with God, the more we will learn to love our neighbor.

Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with your God.

What is God looking for? Men and women willing to receive God’s saving grace, then respond to such grace through the way we love God and love neighbor through fairness and mercy and compassion and love.

As we move away from this Valentine’s Day weekend, may we live not by some made up list of loving ways that include chocolate and teddy bears, but may we live by God’s ways of loving others through justice, kindness and growing in the grace of our Lord Jesus.

May it be so. Let us pray.