

What Does the Lord Require of You and Me?

Micah 6:1-8; Matthew 5:1-12

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This morning's readings are two of the most famous in all of scripture: Micah's undeniable proclamation of our purpose here on earth and Jesus' delineation of what a life lived according to the teachings of Jesus looks like~~the Beatitudes. If there were ever a question about what God wants from us...it's here in these scriptures: To do justice, love kindness and to walk humbly with our God. And that image is filled out a bit in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. We might look at it this way: the Micah passage addresses the **what we are to do**~~the actions; and the Matthew passage addresses **how we do that**. We accomplish the actions of doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with our God by BEING: humble and compassionate, striving for righteousness and mercy, having a pure heart and being a maker of peace. The result of doing and being these things is that we are a blessing to others.

Being a blessing to others. What a concept. Totally other-worldly in popular culture. Certainly not expected or rewarded, for the most part, in the broader society in which we live...and especially when it comes to the business world.

Let's explore this in two ways...being a blessing individually, and then being a blessing as a congregation.

Michael Tenney was by all intense and purposes a successful businessman-- self-described "Type A" profit-driven business leader. His priorities in his thriving business: profit/customers/employees. Sounds right. Right? His success was evident...That is, until January 2001 when he got caught for trying to defraud the government. He was sent to prison for 5 years. But he says in his TedTalk from December 2019 that 2 years into his sentence, he had an experience which completely changed his life. Although he doesn't say it specifically, I imagine it was some sort of spiritual overhaul. He became a monk for some time and now has emerged as a social entrepreneur who is out on the circuit teaching a new way of doing business, devoting his life to "love better" and help others to do the same—He believes that making **love** a priority in business is beneficial as well as profitable.

Based on his research, he outlines in his TedTalk how standard business priorities of profit, customers and employees actually guarantees a company's premature death. But great leaders and profitable companies put loving their employees at the top: doing whatever they can "to improve the long-term well-being of their team members to grow and thrive." Then come the

customers and the goals of the organization. Profit comes naturally as employees know they are cared for. (He cites Herb Keller from Southwest Airlines as an example...)

Fascinating....Tenney's realization of being a spiritual blessing to others by loving and putting people first can even be profitable~. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qCVoohdy16I>

Here's another example. Richard Palmer, co-founder of Nehemiah Manufacturing Co. in Cincinnati, Ohio, puts that same idea of people first into action as well. (Thank you to Kit Smith for forwarding on that article from the Wall Street Journal this week). Nehemiah takes their employees very seriously. Palmer and another consumer-product veteran started Nehemiah a decade ago. Their idea was to create more opportunities in a struggling part of Cincinnati. Increasingly, that meant hiring people who had a particularly hard time finding jobs: those with criminal backgrounds.

Now, workers with criminal records make up around 80% of the company's about 180 employees—and Nehemiah has learned that offering a job to people trying to turn their lives around is just half the battle.“ They have a social service team and an attorney to help their employees face their pasts and help to keep them on track to live their best lives outside of the company—which helps them at work—whether it be substance use, budgeting, moving from homelessness to finding housing and other issues.

Doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with our God. The blessings are endless at Nehemiah Manufacturing. They started out by wanting to bless the city of Cincinnati and its people...and they are thriving.

What might it look like as a church to align our mission with being a blessing? A couple of weeks ago, I came across an article which told the story of one congregation blasting that idea wide open.

Last year, more than 137 million Americans struggled with medical debt, according to a CNBC report. Those costs, usually unexpected, are reportedly the top reason people take money out of their retirement accounts or file for bankruptcy. Those who cannot pay, usually have to face collection agencies.

One congregation in Birmingham Alabama celebrated it's 70th anniversary. In honor of that landmark, they decided to hold a fundraiser to benefit those in need. For its fundraiser, Saint Luke's Episcopal Church partnered with RIP Medical Debt, a nonprofit organization founded by two former debt collection executives that works with donors to purchase and forgive medical debt “from the neediest cases up,” according to its website by purchasing debt on pennies on the dollar.

The Rev. Cameron Nations, an associate rector at Saint Luke's and organizer of fundraiser, said he found out about the organization through Emmanuel Memorial Episcopal Church in Champaign, Illinois, which last year partnered with RIP Medical Debt to forgive \$4 million in

medical debts. Nations had grown up in that congregation and was amazed since it is a small congregation with no major donors.

In this case, the Episcopal Diocese of Alabama quickly got on board, donating just more than \$10,000 to kick off fundraising efforts. The church then raised \$68,000 more, mostly from parishioners, though others in the community pitched in as well, Nations said. Because hospitals sell off unpaid bills at discounted rates, the church and RIP Medical Debt were able to buy \$8.1 million in debt for just \$78,000.

As a result, 6,500 of the neediest households in central Alabama had their medical debt forgiven over the Christmas holidays—people who had no connection with St. Luke's (named for Luke the evangelist who was a physician).

What does the Lord require of you and me? What does doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with our God look like for you and me individually, but also for us as a congregation?

I believe this is the year for us to make some very creative Spirit-driven choices. God has been guiding us to think differently about how we do church. In a few minutes, we will gather for our annual meeting. Thanks be to God, our session will be presenting a balanced budget, which is no small thing. Thanks to your generous stewardship, but also some very careful budgeting and cost-cutting, we have been able to go into this year in a stable way.

I believe God is calling us forth to begin our next steps together in some exciting ways. We want to begin taking steps to renovate our basement, which has sat unfinished for the past 15 years. How can we use that space for mission as well as revenue to keep our congregation moving forward? How can we literally be a blessing to our broader community and those in need?

Additionally, we won't need to do a fundraiser this year to meet our budget, but what if we did a fundraiser for one single mission project? (over and above our Faith in Action dollars) What could we do to **Do justice, love kindness while walking humbly with our God** while being compassionate, striving for righteousness and mercy, having a pure heart and being a maker of peace? We have an opportunity to continue to think outside the box...to continue to make an impact for the glory of God, as this congregation has had a history of doing: Wilton Commons, ABC Houses and more.

One of the reasons I came to this church was its commitment to hands on mission. This congregation has a history of having the courage and faith of thinking and acting in extremely creative ways...putting your faith into action based on what you felt God was calling you as a community to do so that others might be blessed.

So where are we being called to in this moment and in this time. How will we lead in doing justice, loving kindness while walking humbly with our God? How will we be a blessing to others? I can't wait to see~~