

**Sermons from Archwood United Church of Christ
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Micah 6: 1-8
"What Have I Done"

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See if you can recognize these questions from some point in a relationship with someone: What have I done? What did I *do*? Recognize those questions!? In any relationship there's a point at which those questions get asked, or when we know, we'd better ask them. "Have I done something?" Sometimes it's the look, sometimes it's the silence, the attitude, but at some point we know we have to break down and ask. What we get back in response can be pretty unpredictable. "And let me just tell you..." is one way to turn it into a fight. "Well, if I have to even tell you what you've done, we're obviously through..." means it's going to be a long night.

Yes, at some point in any relationship, whether it's the look or the silence, or the guilt that's eating away inside of us, we know it's time to ask "What have I done." Sheepishly, "Have I done something?" Meaning, something wrong...? We don't very often ask the question and think the response will be about something we have done right.

God must wonder the same thing sometimes. In our relationship with God, there are times when we give God attitude, there are times when we rail against God in anger, and there are times we just offer God our silence...as in, I refuse to speak to you. And God must ask, "What have I done?" And, as we know, sometimes it's really hard to get an answer. In Micah, God finally decides to bring a lawsuit against the people of Israel. Sometimes it takes a summons to get our attention.

Today's text in Micah is broken into four separate units – preparing the case, God's questions, the people's response, and Micah's intervention, speaking for God to the people. The first two verses are preparing the jury, the courtroom, and setting the stage.

[The Message] vs. 1-2 *Listen now, listen to God: "Take your stand in court.*

*If you have a complaint, tell the mountains;
make your case to the hills.
And now, Mountains, hear God's case;
listen Earth, you are the jury—
For I am bringing charges against my people.
I am building a case against Israel.*

And here's the case. This is what God wants to know.

*3-5 "Dear people: How have I done you wrong?
Have I burdened you, worn you out? Answer!
I delivered you from a bad life in Egypt;
I paid a good price to get you out of slavery.
I sent Moses to lead you—
and Aaron and Miriam to boot!
Remember what Balak king of Moab tried to pull,
and how Balaam son of Beor turned the tables on him.
Remember all those stories about Shittim and Gilgal.
Keep all God's salvation stories fresh and present."*

The people, knowing their number is up, respond in a way that takes for granted that they know they are guilty – and scared. They know they are so guilty that there isn't anything they could possibly do to set things right, so they get sarcastic. Think of it this way: If on one Valentine's Day you don't bring flowers to your honey, and he or she calls you on it, the response of the people Israel would be like this: "should I have to bring you flowers every day of the year now just to prove that I love you? Should I bring you 100 pounds of chocolate? Will that do it? Would you like me to cut off my ear?" Those are absurd responses, right? So, in the same way, this is how the people respond back to God's complaint:

*6-7 How can I stand up before God
and show proper respect to the high God?
Should I bring an armload of offerings
topped off with year-old calves?
Would God be impressed with thousands of rams,
with buckets and barrels of olive oil?
Would God be moved if I sacrificed my firstborn child,
my precious baby, to cancel my sin?*

Hear their sarcasm? Very wisely, the prophet Micah steps in *before* God answers back. It would be interesting to hear God's response! But I don't think we really would want to hear the justified anger they deserved. So, Micah carefully says:

*8 But God has 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.*

Or, as we hear it traditionally: Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.

It is interesting how this "case" was presented. God does, in essence, ask what God has done to deserve this treatment – what have I done to you? But God then also asked, "In what ways have I wearied you" or burdened you?" (I like when we ask for specifics – so what did I actually do, instead of the big picture of "you never..." Tell me one thing or two things that we can actually talk about.)

It's clear the people have done many things to weary God, but God flips it around and asks what God has done to weary them. Clever. Though God is wearied by Israel's constant disregard for their "big-picture" covenant relationship, God gives specific instances of what God has done for the people: first, remember the stories of being led out of slavery, but, then God gives very concrete, more modern-day examples. References to King Balak and to Balaam are things right in their immediate past – almost meant to answer that age old question, "What have you done for me lately." What God has done for them is not just ancient history, with their ancestors led out from Egypt. God was with you last year, and last week, and is still here today. If God wanted, God could have, and maybe should have, walked away from their relationship, with cause, a long time ago. How has my constantly "saving" you "wearied" you? (sarcasm implied) The prophets Isaiah and Malachi also speak of Israel's "wearying" God.

How can anyone respond to that, especially if you know you've been wrong? So, what can they, what can any of us, do to earn back, as they seem to be asking, God's acceptance? Have you ever thought that this is the way we restore a strained covenant, a broken relationship? How can I earn your love? Were they serious, or just bluffing? Listen: Bowing down on your knees is one thing; sacrificing a calf... But, sacrificing 1,000 rams; offering to sacrifice our firstborn if that would be pleasing? Were they gambling or trying to show God just how difficult it is to please God, trying to prove that God can be unreasonable? "What? Should I bring you 100 pounds of chocolate just to prove my love?"

Is it hard to please God? Let's just stop there a second and consider that. Is it hard to please God? Maybe that's what it feels like some times. Maybe that's why our relationship with God can feel so difficult at times. "God is difficult."

Well, according to Micah, to restore the relationship, if all God wants is for us to do justice, love kindness and be humble, that doesn't seem so complicated. It's all future oriented – do, love, be. The past seems to be forgotten. (And if God is really good at anything, it's forgiveness.) But is what Micah says easy? Is it hard? Or should we plead ignorance? That way we can say nothing is expected of us.

Let's say that it is easy to do what God calls us to do – justice, kindness and humility. It's just the specifics that can get difficult.

Doing justice. We don't put ourselves above others. It's the golden rule in practice. We don't approve of or promote systems that disenfranchise others, even though we ourselves might not be affected. In fact, doing justice means we act in ways to turn the order of injustice upside down. We do something about it. I read an article this week that really stayed with me. It said, God sent Jesus not to "make a difference in the world," but to make the world different. Hence, the blessings and woes from Luke. What do you think about that? God sent Jesus not to make a difference in the world but to make the world different. But in addition, it's not to just make adjustments to the social order, it is to replace it with the values of the kingdom of God – love and justice. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor who stood up to the Nazis and Hitler, and was killed it, famously said "we should not merely bind the wounds created by the crushing wheel, but to destroy the crushing wheel itself." Think what the church would be like if we did not merely heal the sick but destroyed sickness. Not to just love one another but eliminate hatred. What would our ministry look like then?

Archbishop Oscar Romero was assassinated by the government of El Salvador in the 1970s for speaking out on behalf of the poor. Prior to being Archbishop he had been quite conservative, thinking the place of the church was simply to preach salvation and care for the wounded. But the injustice that surrounded him converted him to the cause of the poor. He said, "A church that doesn't provoke any crisis, a gospel that doesn't unsettle, a word of God that doesn't get under anyone's skin, a word of God that doesn't touch the real sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed – what gospel is that?"

The second thing is to love kindness. If so, we actively seek ways to show mercy and love toward others, especially those who have been flattened under the thumb of oppression, crushed by the wheel of injustice.

And lastly, but the foundation for everything before and everything after, is to walk humbly with God. We do not put ourselves above God. And we live in service to the God who created us, who led our people out of slavery, who gave us breath yesterday, who touches our hearts today. God hasn't burdened any one of us beyond what is the simple basis for our faith – that by faith, Christ has changed our world, not just made a difference. God gave us life, but Christ changed it. And for the freedom, the love, the life, the breath of every day – what have we done? Have I done something?