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Micah 6:1-8

EMPTY PRAISE

OK, I might get in a little trouble here. I'm not going to talk about something political or give my visceral opinion on a hot button issue, I'm going to talk about...kids' sports. There, I've said it. I am now coaching my oldest son's basketball team and, frankly, enjoying it very much. But there is a trend in kids' sports that I don't agree with, and my opinion on the matter is NOT shared by others.

There's a scene in the pretty dreadful movie, Meet the Fockers, in which Bernie Focker (played by Dustin Hoffman) proudly displays his grown son's awards when he visits to introduce his in-laws-to-be. "I didn't know they made ninth-place ribbons," says the future father-in-law, played by Robert DeNiro. "They have them up to 10th place," Focker replies. "There's a bunch on the 'A for Effort' shelf there."

That's what is happening now in our sporting events. My kids are growing up expecting ribbons and trophies after every season of basketball or soccer, regardless of how many games they either "won" or "lost" - meaningless terms because we don't keep score. I know that the idea is to encourage kids, to use the sporting events to raise their self-esteem, but I can't help but wonder if we're not just fostering a sense of mediocrity. I mean, so-called "winning and losing" is a part of life. Sometimes you eat the bear, sometimes the bear eats you. And all of this award fever seems to run against that, as if all you have to do in sports or life is just show up.

We know that's not the case, and I also know that's not what is really going on at the post-season party for the kids, but I do still hear that voice. In fact, I think I should hear it. In fact...I think that the voice is God. It is God telling us quietly that we are not expected to just show up and cheer, we are expected to participate...and

our participation has ground rules.

Let's take, for instance, worship. What is worship? Well that's what I think that Micah is addressing in the portion of this passage we don't hear as often – verses 1–7. God is pleading a case. God opens by asking Israel "What have I done to deserve this" as if God were a teenager feeling that first sting of bad relationships. "What gives?", God says. I have made promises and delivered, I have brought you out of slavery, sent leaders to direct you, delivered you from enemies, O Israel. What have I done to wear you out? Answer me!

Israel answers with praise – with sacrifices and burnt offerings. The same way that we answer with praise music and hallelujahs, as if our loudest cheering produces the Kingdom of God or that getting worship just right is what God demands. We still don't understand that worship is for us, not for God. Now, I didn't say that worship was unimportant or should be cast aside. Worship enables us to charge our batteries, to renew our spirit. I love my I-Phone, and it enables me to do lots of communication and tasks that I couldn't do with such efficiency otherwise...but if I don't plug it in every night, it is worthless. That's the same way with me and worship. I need it. Yes, I have to be here. It is my job. But I came long before that was true, and I still come because I am a different person when I leave...at least I want to be a different person. Worship reminds us of what we are all about and sets a goal to for us to reach. If we work hard enough at it, worship can imagine for us this new world where everyone belongs, justice, mercy and humility prevail and we treasure our time to get up and greet everyone because that reminds us of God. If we have all that – plus coffee, of course – then worship might really be something. It might be transformative. But it still wouldn't be what God asks of us.

What God asks of us should be pretty obvious – we sing about it every Sunday. Do justice, love kindness and mercy and walk humbly with your God. Now, as with all things –it's how we define those things that really matter.

Justice. What is that and how do we do it? Well, here's what the ancient Hebrews called it – mishpat. It is really a legal term that has to do with deciding a case, with judgment as in the application of fairness and equity. What the Hebrew ears would have heard was a connection to the law – to covenant, to faithfulness to a promise between God and Israel all evoked by that single word. And the Bible never suggests that doing justice is something we stumble onto. You don't do justice by simply being a nice guy...by just being a good citizen and minding your own business. If you're going to do justice, you will need to be intentional, alert and deliberate. You'll never get there without some serious attention to intentions.

Kindness. Well, that seems pretty easy, but then again the Hebrews said hesed, which has a depth of meaning. While it does mean goodness, it also has that sense of faithfulness as well as demonstrating loyalty and mercy. It is defined by looking at when and where it is used – and that leads us to believe that this word was the ancient Hebrews word for the character of God. And we are to love that, to long for it like a beloved...a beloved we are willing to risk things for.

And then there is humility. That's a tough one. What it meant to those ancient ears is a little unclear – something like modesty, being proper, but perhaps the best way to think of it is the way that Eugene Peterson translates what we heard as “walk humbly with your God”. He says, “...don't take yourself too seriously...take God seriously.” The opposite of this is hubris, the twisted notion that we are in charge, that we are “self-made” people and a willful selfishness that says, “It's my life, I can do what I want.”

Justice is tough. Kindness is challenging. But this humility might be the most daunting task to a 21st century, freedom loving, independence minded citizen of the U.S. ...because it asks us to submit. It asks us to place ourselves under the rule and authority of God, as if God were our government...unelected, in office for life and without absolute clout.

So, what might worship be like if it led us to these places? We'd like to think that we try to do that, but there is always room for growth because these supposedly simple ground rules are moving targets. Still, this is the place it begins. And here we can dare to evoke this kind of transformation in our worldview, in our hearts and minds and we can also hope to begin to break down some of the strangleholds that Christianity has developed in order to walk away from the ground rules, just as Micah chastised Israel for doing.

For instance, notice that nowhere in the ground rules is the word “truth”. When the question is posed “what is good”, verbs come back, not a loud cry of “truth”. What is good? That word “good” is *to*, the same word that God uses when describing creation. And God said let there be light and there was and God pronounced it *to*. Yes, the question is a philosophical one, it is an ethical inquiry, but this is also a very basic statement about creation itself – what is of the same essence as creation? Doing what is fair and just to your neighbor, being compassionate and loyal in your love, and not taking yourself too seriously— but taking God seriously. That is the same stuff of creation.

If you were to do a little survey you might think that the number one concern of Christians at large was “truth”...you might think that the most critical issue for Christians today was this false dichotomy between fact and fiction. The Bible is God's word of truth. God wants us to have the right answers to the right questions: Was creation really just seven days that happened 6,000 years ago? Should women be allowed to preach? Is homosexuality a sin? Is hell a real place? What is “the truth?”, without any acknowledgement of the need for imagination, the crucial role in our lives of faith for mystery – for not knowing the answer and doing something anyway. That's actually the definition of faith – loving someone despite knowing if they've sinned too much to “deserve” it.

This passage says something else. Having the correct answers isn't the same as

doing the correct things. Many people have the idea that “do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God” is a call to social justice...and it is. But it is so much more. It is a call that takes us beyond the soup kitchens and the classrooms and into our hearts. For if we are not willing to be just, kind and humble in every place we are, then we're not really participating...and that means even here, in the church.

How we treat one another is at least as important as how we treat the world beyond these doors. If we cannot give one another the benefit of the doubt, then how will we do that in a world driven by suspicion and deceit? If we cannot practice grace here, then how will this be any kind of recharging station for our spiritual batteries? If we cannot be fully inclusive of people here, even people with different ideas about worship, church and God herself, how will we practice compassion and justice in the world outside?

This passage from Micah is more than just a great slogan – it is a recipe for building community, which is what God is really interested in. And the only way that we are community together is if we are faithfully just and fair, hunger for kindness the same way that we love our favorite meal and remain humble enough to honor everyone's walk with God.

There is no doubt that some of us experience God through music and some of us experience God in the faces of people we are helping, and some through prayer, and some through liturgy, and some in the caring arms of a group of friends at the worst moments of their lives. That is what a church does, if it can do it adequately enough...build a community that can be many things to many people.

So this call from Micah, the one that we hear every single Sunday, may still have something to say to us. Perhaps we have lost our way a bit. We have collections of people who each think that their way is the way, but the call of this powerful text of Micah is that we are not measured by how tightly we cling to anything, but by how wide we can open our arms. If we are confessing, then maybe I will confess that I have not done enough to emphasize that if we are doing the radical work of the Kingdom of God with any accuracy, then we won't be setting up scenarios that have winners and losers because when we do that, no one wins. Well...now I've done it. I've gone and changed my own mind about my original point. Now who's in favor of 10th place medals for kids' sports?

Maybe I am OK with that, as long as we move past it at some point. As long as we don't stay in that place where just showing up is enough...where we really begin to ask ourselves about what we are doing. Keep in mind that the unbelievable work being done in Nicaragua by the Mayflower Medical Outreach started right here in this room, during worship. Oh, it spread far beyond this place, but that's the point. It begins with our worship, our study, our prayer and our fellowship together and then it moves forward. Then we go out into the world and begin to deal with the not so

theoretical issues. We gather to help students who aren't our children work for a better chance. We come together to provide the best meal we can make for people who are struggling with things that we can't even imagine. We reach out, advocate for, protest against, speak to, learn about, engage with and fight for that world that we hope to see. And when the change comes too slowly...when the tiny benchmarks that we must learn to cling to don't come fast enough, then we have this place, and worship...to try and recharge us. But likewise if we never do anything more than sing the most beautiful arias or cry "Hallelujah" at the top of our lungs...if we never do anything more than pray fervently or have communion every Sunday it is empty praise.

As we prepare to think about the future of our church together, about the deep qualities of what it means to be community together, let us be reminded that our worship is for us more than it is for God. It is to remind us of where we stand, what we do and what it means to proclaim that the wider vision of God's love is for all of us. We are not a church that is just about music or worship, we are not a church just about the ritual or the liturgy...and we are not a church that is just about mission work and reaching out to the world beyond these doors. We are all of this. These things cannot be separated. And that together we claim a remarkable witness to the gospel – one that is complete with the inescapable human weaknesses and flaws, one that often misses the mark, but one that hopes and strives, stands against the current and that believes, in a myriad of different ways, in our central message – to be a follower of Jesus means more than just a right answer, it means doing something radically different in responding to the issues around us, loving something that the world doesn't exactly demonstrate in abundance and walking with a virtue that more often lies in tatters on the ground than gets used.

Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with your God. It is enough praise for a lifetime.

AMEN