

**15 May 2022 Harbor Unitarian Universalist Congregation**  
**Tom Wagner, Micah 6:1-8, “Do Justice, Love Kindness, Walk Humbly”**

This passage from the prophet **Micah** is quite familiar to me, particularly v. 8. The Church of the Brethren summarized the verse for our “**Goals for the [19]80s**” in the phrase: “**Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly.**” It frequently appeared in denominational literature and even made its way to T-shirts and coffee mugs from Brethren Press. I had considerable exposure to the theme during the decade that included my final years of college, an archival internship at the denominational offices and seminary studies. I recall the imperatives primarily used as rationale for peace & justice advocacy and service ministries. Much of this was during the height of **U.S. interference in Central American civil wars**. I had older college friends helping rescue Salvadorians in U.N. refugee camps along the Honduran border. In the States, congregations were encouraged to offer their meetinghouses as **sanctuary** for Central American refugees. At the time, the Reagan Administration refused to recognize their claims for asylum. Some of us risked legal trouble by providing **transportation and shelter** to refugees on their way to sanctuary sites. Some of us followed a **legal route**, volunteering with a program that bailed out vetted refugees from an INS prison in Texas, prepared them for interviews with the Canadian consulate in Atlanta for **resettlement in Canada**. INS refunded the bail once the refugees crossed the Canadian border. The organization then recycled the bail for more refugees. Some of us had ties to both underground and over-ground movements.

I confess it has been awhile since I have thought about this scripture passage. I welcomed Sue’s request to comment on it, because it has given me a chance to look at it with fresh eyes. As has been my custom, I will walk us through the broader **historical and literary context** of our reading. From there I will tell stories and raise issues under the **themes of justice, kindness and humility**.

In the Hebrew Bible or **TANAKH**, Micah appears among **the Prophets** (Neviim), the second of three major divisions of the sacred text. Jewish tradition divides this group into the Former Prophets (Joshua through Kings) and the **Latter Prophets** (Isaiah through Malachi, excluding Daniel). Micah is part of a further subdivision of 12 short prophetic books collectively known as **The Twelve**. Christian tradition, following the book arrangement in the **Septuagint** (LXX)—the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E. Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible—places the prophets at the end of the Old Testament. The 4<sup>th</sup> century C.E. African bishop Augustine of Hippo (354-430 A.D.) was the first to refer to The Twelve as “**The Minor Prophets**” due to their relative brevity compared to the much larger works of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. The designation has stuck.

Micah was active between the **late 8<sup>th</sup> century and early 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E in Judah**. He was a roughly contemporary with Isaiah, living in the fertile foothills southwest of Jerusalem, near the border with Philistia, in the **rural village of Moresheth**. This country preacher **denounced capital city elites** who used their power and wealth to **displace traditional small landholders** through dishonest business practices, abetted by religious leaders willing to legitimate the power structure. Micah likely saw firsthand examples of dispossession among his neighbors. On the international scene, the **Assyrian Empire** was on the move. The Northern Kingdom of **Israel** first became a tributary state of Assyria in 841 B.C.E. By **722 B.C.E.** Assyria completely absorbed the kingdom, destroyed its capital Samaria and deported much of the population. **Judah** became a vassal state to Assyria much later in **732 B.C.E.** and became subject to frequent invasions. Micah was well aware that the invaders would eventually sweep through his home area on their way to Jerusalem. However, the final invasion and destruction of Jerusalem he warned about came much later in **586 B.C.E.** under the **Babylonians**, as the consequence for the ruling class’ corruption and injustice. While Micah pronounces some rather harsh judgments, his text also includes messages of **hope**. **Micah 4:1-4** speaks of a time of peace when weapons of war will be repurposed as **agricultural tools**. **Micah 5:2** looks forward to a **future Davidic king** who will arise from the humble village of **Bethlehem**. The Gospel of Matthew much later applied the passage to the **birth of Jesus**.

In our Chapter 6 reading, **YHWH issues summons for a lawsuit against** Judah's leaders before the **mountains, hills and even the foundations of the earth** (vv.1-2). The natural world participates in the proceedings. In v. 3 YHWH begins by asking the people, "**What wrong have I done you? What hardship have I caused you?**" **daring them to "Testify against me!"** (JPS) God then recites a short list **acts of salvation** performed from the escape from Egyptian slavery, through the wilderness years and early settlement in Canaan. The defendants respond in vv. 6-7 asking what ritual **sacrifices** would satisfy YHWH's claims. The proposed offers **become more extravagant in each line**: year old calves, thousands of rams or 10,000 rivers of oil. The proposals likely serve as commentary on how the wealthy think they can buy their way out of trouble. It also raises the prior question how they got their wealth. While **child sacrifice** was known as a fertility rite among neighboring peoples, it likely is listed here for **shock effect**. Micah responds, YHWH has already revealed the **requirements: to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God**. The verse summarizes the **Torah**. Centuries later Jesus of Nazareth summarized the teachings of the Law (Torah) and prophets in the command to **love both God and neighbor** (Matt. 22:34-40 and parallels). Both summaries are a reminder that our relationships to each other are central to our relationship with the divine.

Now I want to think a bit aloud on these **themes of justice, kindness and humility**. There is nothing comprehensive about these thoughts. However, maybe they will spark your imagination.

**Justice** bears a sense of **fairness, honesty and equity** in addition to biblical understandings of **righteousness and doing right**. In the face of violation, justice denotes **correction, restoration and balance**. While some folks like to quote "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth", they purposely ignore that this form of the saying is only part of Jesus' longer discussion of **forgiveness** in Matthew 5:38-42.

Consider a **sole surviving slice of chocolate cake** sitting on a kitchen counter, under the gaze of greedy pairs of eyes. Most of us have at sometime been party or witness to such scenes. A close friend's mother use to resolve the problem by telling one child to **cut the disputed prize in two and then give the bigger piece to the other child**. This approach generally assured equal division of the spoils. Granted, resolving conflict before anyone gets hurt is far simpler than negotiating a cease-fire in a historic blood feud. Yet, such simple childhood experiences give us a sense of justice in the world.

**Dunker tradition** has long been known as one of the historic peace churches. While phrase "**peace & justice**" has become a significant part of our ethos in recent decades, it took exposure to Gandhi, the Civil Rights Movement and even Liberation Theology to examine the **roots of violence in social and economic injustice**. My spiritual ancestors weren't as active in the Abolition Movement as the Quakers, but they did consistently **forbid slave ownership** among the membership. Enslavers who wished to join the church had to first free their slaves. Yearly Meeting minutes from **1782 and 1797** required former enslavers to **provide adults with a new set of clothes**. Children could remain under their care until the age of majority, but in the meantime, they were to **be taught to read and write**, a rather subversive act at the time. By **1854**, Yearly Meeting also required former enslavers to pay **back wages for past labor** as determined by the local congregation, and provide **safe transportation** to free-soil. Granted, few enslavers were knocking down the door to join a plain, mostly German speaking pacifist sect, but it happened enough to make these policies necessary. .

Sadly, **our larger society** that has so richly benefited from the forced labor of some and stolen land from others **has repeatedly refused to take responsibility for its debt**. The promise of "**forty acres and a mule**" during the final months of the Civil War, had Andrew Johnson not rescinded it, would have been a bargain for nearly **250 years of unpaid wages** and given former slaves some economic stability. Curiously, how some people quote the portion of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's "I have a Dream" speech concerning judging someone by the content of their character, not skin color in opposition to affirmative action, but forget that he also said black people were marching that day to **collect on "a check which has come back marked 'insufficient funds.'**"

**Kindness** invokes words like **mercy, generosity and even hospitality**. While justice can be transactional, kindness is a **gift freely given**. Some might call it “paying it forward”. I recall as an archival intern, one of our elderly volunteers came up to me at the end of Annual Meeting in a distant city and handed me a ten-dollar bill to help with travel expenses. Several days later when we both had returned to the archives I tried to pay him back, but he simply requested that I **pass it along** to someone else who needs it in the future.

During the lead up and opening days of the **Iraq War** in the **spring of 2003, Christian Peacemaker Teams** and other groups had a presence in Bagdad in an attempt to stop the war. About 10 days into the initial bombings, the group was ordered out of the country for their own safety. The delegation was traveling at high speed **toward the Jordanian border** in a three-car convoy, when a **tire blew** on the third car and the driver lost control. The vehicle left the road and landed on its side in a 10-foot ditch. The tire had likely hit shrapnel or other road debris. The occupants of the totaled vehicle were able to crawl or be pulled from the car. Everyone was conscious, though bruised and badly shaken. Two passengers clearly required medical attention. The other two cars were well out of sight. Due to intensive U.S and British bombing few cars were traveling the road. Thankfully, a civilian Iraqi driver soon stopped and asked if he could help. He packed the 5 additional passengers into his vehicle and took them to the nearest town, **Rutba** about 6 km from the crash site. It is a city of about 20,000 people located 140 km east of the Jordanian border. Though there were no apparent military structures, **much of the town had been destroyed** by US and British bombing 3 days earlier. The destruction included a **children’s hospital**, which had resulted in the deaths of two children. The group was taken to the only functioning medical facility in town, a 20-foot x 20-foot 4 bed **clinic**. Town’s people quickly gathered to inspect their uninvited foreign guests. Team members hastily offered copies of a CPT handout written in both English and Arabic describing the group’s mission in Iraq. With that introduction, the **people of Rutba warmly welcomed the wounded Americans, just three days after American and British aircraft had destroyed their town.**

When the **doctor** arrived, the Team had another surprise—he **spoke English** and was able to start examinations immediately. While everyone had been badly bruised, one Team member had a dislocated shoulder. Another had a broken thumb and several broken ribs. Still another Team member had a deep gash on his head, which required 10 stitches. The doctor was professionally embarrassed because the embargo and recent bombing had made many medications unavailable. He had to sew the stitches without the aid of anesthesia. He would have taken the group by ambulance to Jordan, but the bombing had destroyed the ambulance. About two hours later the group had been treated and the other two cars of the convoy returned to find their missing teammates. The group thanked the people of Rutba for their hospitality and tried unsuccessfully to pay the clinic and doctor for their services. The doctor replied, **“We treat everyone in our clinic: Muslim, Christian, Iraqi or American. We are part of the same family you know.”**

The word **humility** brings to mind values of **gratitude, appreciation and even awe**. It’s not about groveling before others, but rather requires some self-respect in order to show respect to others. It is about making a realistic assessment of one’s abilities and place in the world. **Helen Keller** put it well, **“I am only one, but I am still one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something. And because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do something I can do.”** Humility also teaches us to listen more and talk less.

One of the rituals unique to Dunker tradition is the practice of **footwashing** during Love Feast and Communion. In ancient times, servants or women performed the task as an act of hospitality. Dunker practice is more equitable since each person washes the feet of another regardless of status until everyone has washed and been washed. We often speak of the ritual as humble service.

A former missionary and seminary professor **Chalmer Faw** use to tell this story about foot washing from his days in **Nigeria in the 1940s**. Garkida where he and his wife were stationed was the central church in the Bura language area. When Love Feast was held, members from mission points in the smaller villages would gather at Garkida. One day a Nigerian evangelist from a village among the Whona tribe asked why they always had

to travel to Garkida for Love Feast. They would like to celebrate in their village occasionally. Faw and the Nigerian Brethren leaders were a bit concerned that the arrangements would make a lot extra work. However, the evangelist said the local members would take care of everything. People from Garkida had only to come and participate. Indeed everything was ready as promised. Curiously, Bro. Chalmer noted that **as they began to wash feet, non-members from the village began to pay particular attention.** Since the rite was taking place under a tree rather than in a building, it was publicly visible. The crowd of spectators grew. After the service, the village chief told Bro. Faw through an interpreter that he wished to be a part of it along with his whole village. The chief was an old man and was able to remember when British officers first colonized the area. He remembered how the British conscripted the young men for work crews and the army, and treated the young women dishonorably. However, **this was the first time he had seen a white man get down on his knees and wash a black man's feet.** If that was what this new faith was about, he wanted to be a part of it.

Recently my thoughts on the phrase **“walk humbly with your God”** have taken me beyond human relationships, to an awareness relationship with **creation** and the **web of life**. YHWH's summons to the **mountains, hills and foundations of the earth** earlier in the passage reminds me of our interconnections with the universe. It calls us to a spirituality that walks lightly on the earth, with a sense of respect, awe, even gratitude.

Our house has a lot of open space with few interior doors. So, phone calls are rarely private. Having overheard numerous conversations between **my mother and me**, Lois thinks it's rather comical that we spend considerable time **comparing local weather conditions in northern Indiana and west Michigan.** While most people consider it small talk, I think there is more to it. As a farmer's daughter, my mother grew up with a keen awareness of weather conditions. It's also her way of getting a more complete sense of the context I live in.

However, it does remind me of the old joke that everyone talks about the weather, but no one does anything about it. Maybe that is the problem in our context of **climate change.** **Fossil fuel** industries make excuses for dragging their feet concern renewable or sustainable energy sources. Other corporations use Earth Day themes in their advertising to look like they are making a difference. I believe it's call **“green washing”**. Perhaps our society's greatest **hubris** is that we too often put our faith in technical fixes to resolve our **environmental problems**, requiring much energy and more intervention. The problem is well satirized in the movie **“Don't Look Up”**. At some point, we have to learn how **live within the rhythms of creation**, instead of setting the pace.

Do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God. Amen.

## Notes

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