

What the Lord Requires

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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? (Micah 6:8)

When God has a bone to pick with his people, God sends a prophet to deliver the message. "The Lord has a controversy with his people," Micah says, and he tells them why God is not pleased.

Frederick Buechner says that a prophet is the kind of person who gets invited to dinner only once. Prophets are annoying. They tell people things they don't want to hear. Most of the time people just ignore the prophet's message. Sometimes they shoot the messenger. It's striking, in Matthew's Gospel, that the last major teaching of Jesus is a prophetic word about what God expects come Judgment Day, and then immediately comes the Passion Narrative, the plot to get rid of Jesus.

Sociologists say that religion in America is a kind of marketplace phenomenon. We're such a consumer-oriented society, a nation of shoppers, it shouldn't surprise us that people act like consumers of religion too. Shoppers look for bargains. They want the best value for the lowest cost. As in any other market, the more suppliers there are, the more competition for customers, and the stronger the pressure to keep costs down. Among other things, this means soft pedaling the prophets. If the prophetic word is that God is not pleased because we're not doing what the Lord requires, people go shopping for a cheaper, more comforting word. If First Church doesn't give me what I want, I can check out Second Church. If the Presbyterians don't have it, maybe the Methodists will.

Preachers understand this – which is why there's so little prophetic preaching in America and so much prosperity gospel and warm and fuzzy talk from so many pulpits. In the 1850s any southern preacher who declared that slavery contradicted the Golden Rule would lose his congregation to some other preacher who said that slavery was just fine with God. Today, all you have to do is turn on the TV to find a preacher who will tell you that God wants you to be comfortable and prosperous here and now, and then you automatically go to

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heaven, regardless of what you did or didn't do for the people around you. Those preachers always go light on the prophets.

It's amazing how quickly we confuse our own opinions with reality. Some people choose not to believe in God, and that settles the matter in their minds – as if the reality of God depended on whether or not we believe in him. We can believe that the earth is flat, or the moon is made of green cheese, but that doesn't make it so. We can believe in a God who is all comfort and no expectation or judgment, but what if it isn't true? What if we're just fooling ourselves when we want a warm and fuzzy faith without hard challenges, without moral imperatives, without any cross to bear?

That's pretty much what Jesus describes in the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats. First of all, it's a parable of Judgment Day. You don't hear much about judgment from peddlers of the prosperity gospel. But there it is, right there in the gospel, straight from Jesus himself. If we believe that Jesus is the Son of God, shouldn't we take him seriously when he tells us what God expects?

Jesus says each of us will be accountable to God for the way we live, and for what we do with what we have. He says that in lots of places, but here in Matthew 25 he says what separates the sheep from the goats is what each of us did or did not do for people in need. "When I was hungry or naked or sick or a stranger or in prison, did you care for me?" the Son of Man will ask. And the answer to that question determines who's a sheep and who's a goat, who goes to heaven and who goes to hell. That may be the scariest passage in the whole Bible. What if he really means it? What if we really are responsible for the people around us, and our eternal destiny depends on what we've done for them?

If that doesn't make us squirm a bit, we're not really listening. And before we rush to dismiss it, or go running down the road in search of a cheaper gospel, remember, Jesus says there will be surprises come Judgment Day. The sheep won't even know they were sheep, necessarily. They just did what came naturally to them, which was to take care of people. It never occurred to them that they were caring for Jesus.

But the goats won't know they were goats either. They had all kinds of reasons why it wasn't their responsibility to care for those people. It never occurred to them that the hungry or the sick or the naked or the strangers or the prisoners would turn out to be Jesus. If they had known it was Jesus, of course

they would have taken care of him: he holds the keys to heaven. They know which side their bread is buttered on. But they didn't think he was serious when he said that if we neglect the least of these, we neglect him too – and heaven is not a place for people who ignore other people's needs.

Some think that messages like this are appeals to guilt, as if the idea was to make people feel guilty enough to get up and do something. But that's not the point at all. It's not about guilt; it's about love. Guilt is all about *me*. I feel bad, so I go and do something to relieve my conscience, to make myself feel better. But the sheep aren't motivated by guilt. They're motivated by love. Love is about the *other person* and what he needs, what's best for her. The sheep don't even know they are sheep. They're not thinking about themselves at all. For them, it's about love and kindness, about treating people the way we want to be treated.

That's what the Lord requires, according to Micah. Do justice: do what's fair, what you would want someone to do for you, if you were in their situation. Love kindness: act out of grace and generosity, not out of self-obsessed guilt. And walk humbly with your God: don't think so much about yourself at all, just do what pleases God.

Now if you ask how we're doing here at Westminster, compared to what we could be doing, the answer is, not so well. If we look honestly at the resources we have, and look at a world full of need, many of us are not doing well at all. Just do the math. If we divide our income after taxes into the amount we give to God's work in the world, what percentage do we come up with? If the answer is two or three or four percent, is that really the best we can do? Do we really need to keep 96 or 97 or 98 percent of our money for ourselves and our families?

Of course, we have no trouble coming up with reasons why we shouldn't do any more than we already are. Reason is ever the servant of desire, as Reinhold Niebuhr said, which is why we have the word "rationalize." But what do you suppose the Son of Man will say about us, when he's sorting out the sheep and the goats?

Our stewardship pledges so far this year are running a bit behind last year's, so at the moment it looks as though we'll have less to work with in 2010 than we had in 2009. Of course some of our members are suffering from the sluggish economy or a job transition, and they really can't do more right now. But many

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of us still have plenty of room to grow in our giving, more than enough to make up for what others are unable to do.

Experts say that if we want people to give, we have to tell them specifically why their money is needed, what will happen, or won't happen, if they don't give. We can do that, of course, but as disciples of Jesus Christ, should we really have to be coaxed and cajoled into giving more than a couple percent of our resources to God's work in the world?

Does anybody really not know that there are millions of hungry people in the world, and that the church helps to feed them? That there are millions of homeless people, and the church helps to shelter them? That there are millions of children suffering from illnesses that are readily treatable, and the church's missions help to vaccinate and cure them? That millions of children lack schools and supplies for learning, and the church helps to educate them? Does anyone not know that hundreds of people in our own area are unemployed, or temporarily homeless, or unable to pay the rent and buy food as a result of the recession, and the church helps to see them through? Does anyone not know that millions of people in this country and around the world have never really heard the gospel, or seen it lived out in a compelling way, and that's what the church lifts up all the time? Does anybody here not know these things? Really?

If anybody doesn't know, we can tell you. We can tell you about 700 families who got food last month from Produce to the People in Pittsburgh, or hundreds more supported by SHIM or the Interfaith Hospitality Network in the South Hills. We can tell you about children in India who are sheltered by pastor Timothy, whom we met and support with our Outreach funds. We can tell you about street children in Malawi that we hope to house and educate with our sister church in Zomba, and about the medical clinics we've visited, and the theological college training bright young ministers for the rapidly growing church in Africa. We can tell you about hundreds of children in Haiti who are being educated through a school we're helping to build right now, learning about the love of Christ, and developing skills to support themselves and their families and rise up out of the poverty.

These are just some of the things we do with our offerings – not to mention all that we do for the people who gather at Westminster, and the community around us. And these are the kinds of things that won't get done if we don't step up our giving.

Next week Advent begins, and we'll move on to talk about other things, about the coming of Jesus. But today is Christ the King Sunday, and it reminds us that the one who is coming is Lord of heaven and earth. He says he will come again to judge the world, to hold us accountable for what we have done or failed to do with what we have.

There's still time, though many of Jesus' parables carry a sense of urgency. There's still time to share your commitment to ministry and mission through Westminster Church for the coming year. If you're a member and you've already made your pledge to do the best you can, thank you for that. If you're a member and haven't pledged yet, we need to hear from you soon. The church can't plan its efforts unless members let us know how much they're willing to help. And if by chance you've already turned in a pledge and want to revise it, there's still time for that too. If you accidentally left off a zero at the end of your pledge, or got distracted and wrote in a "1" when you meant to write a "2" or a "3," just send in another card to replace the old one – no questions asked.

When the world runs out of need, then we can all cut back on our efforts. In the meantime, the prophets and Jesus himself tell us clearly what the Lord requires. They tell us what Christ the king will ask one day, what he asks of us now: whether we take care of the least of his brothers and sisters; whether we do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.

What do you suppose he will think of our answer?