

Streetsville United Church

Sunday, February 2, 2020

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“TRUE RELIGION”

Micah 6:8

Many people say about themselves, “I’m spiritual but not religious.” That’s quite popular these days and there is a good side to it. By saying that, people are acknowledging that they are more than just physical beings. They are acknowledging the instinct that God has placed within us – that this universe and life itself cannot be explained without reference to a Creator. And they also are recognizing their spiritual need.

But people who say this most often have a free floating faith which never finds structure or focus. Furthermore, they often have no sense of spiritual discipline, no worship, no prayer time, no sustained reading of Scripture. But we say that being religious and being spiritual go together. Religion gives a sense of coherence and structure to your spirituality. That’s why worship church and spiritual practices are not optional for Christians. They are necessary and keep us grounded and growing in faith.

Now having put in a good word for religious practices, let me say this. There is good religion and bad religion, false religion and true religion. When religion becomes a means of earning God’s favour, then it is false religion. But this has been true of religion throughout human history. We think that our religious acts - prayer, worship, service or making some sacrifice, earn us points before God. It is a balancing of the scales - placing good deeds over against our sins, so that the scales balance in our favour. But there’s no assurance in that because the Bible never tells us how much is enough. Any religious practice which is an attempt to earn God’s favour is in vain. But true religion is not about earning. True religion is a response to what God has done for us.

The prophet Micah tells us what such religion looks like. In Micah 6:8 we read the kind of religious acts God requires of those whom he has already saved, those who walk by faith in his grace. “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?”

In verses 1-6 God is putting his people on trial. They have fallen away from God and disobeyed him. God asks, “What have I done to you? How have I wearied you? Remember what I did for you – I brought you up from Egypt. I protected you in the wilderness, I defeated Midian on your behalf; I brought you across the Jordan into the promised land. In other words, I saved you.”

Then Micah speaks for himself and the people. What should they do to please God and turn back to him? Shall they give more burnt offerings, thousands of rams, rivers of oil, even their first born for their transgression, for their sins? Actually some of the surrounding nations did offer

their first born children to the false god Moloch as a way of earning his favour. The Hebrews were tempted to follow suit. But the Lord God of Israel despised such a practice and didn't want at all.

Now God did prescribe certain animal sacrifices for his people to bring to the altar. But those sacrifices didn't buy God's favour. Bringing those sacrifices faithfully was a sign that the people were trusting in God and his mercy to forgive their sins. There's a parallel to our celebration of the Lord's Supper. Holy Communion is not something we do for God. This sacrament reminds us of what God has done for us. In Christ crucified God himself has made the final, once-for-all sacrifice for sin. We receive this sacrament trusting that through the Saviour's broken body and shed blood God has forgiven our sins, reconciled us to himself and gives us new and eternal life. We receive this sacrament in faith and our faith is strengthened here by the presence of the living Christ.

Micah was telling the people. "More religion and more sacrifices are not what you need. God has shown you what he requires of you. So do that as a sign of your trust in God's salvation. Do that as a sign of your gratitude for what God has done."

It's the same for us. More religion is not what we need, not in terms of trying to earn something from God. True religion is our grateful response to God's saving acts. And here is true religion. "To do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God."

First, "to do justice."

A well-known crime figure was on trial for first-degree murder. He feared conviction and instructed his lawyer to do whatever was necessary to reduce the charges. So the lawyer approached one juror and bribed him to hold out for manslaughter. If there was any other verdict, he wouldn't get paid. The jury deliberated for days and returned a verdict of manslaughter. When the lawyer met with the juror to pay the bribe, he asked, "How did you convince the other jurors to reduce the charge to manslaughter?" The juror answered, "Well, you told me to get a verdict of manslaughter, or I wouldn't get paid. It took me days to convince them to vote with me on that verdict. They all wanted to acquit him."

Sometimes God takes care of justice in his own way. But you and I are called to DO justice. Now in the Bible, there are several meanings to this word justice, *mishpat*. Basically it means seeking to do what is right in God's eyes. But it's not just personal righteousness; it has the dimension of seeking to do right for others. We can't change the world, but when we see people not getting a fair share in God's bounty we seek to do something about it.

I just read a fascinating book called "Beyond Miracles". It is the story of the Scott Mission in Toronto which is still ongoing. I was especially moved reading about their work during the Great Depression when they provided a million meals for hungry people, clothes for adults and children, language classes for newcomers, bus fare, even money for coal to heat homes. People would have died without the work of the Scott Mission, done in Jesus' name, but based simply on human need. Often money ran short, but the Zeidman family, which started and ran the mission, trusted in God, and somehow, almost miraculously, needs for the mission came through.

And though times have changed, there still are many people who fall through the cracks. Which is why such ministries need our support.

In my Grade seven class there was a boy who always asked to be seated near the blackboard, even though he wore glasses. Over a game of chess at lunch one day I asked him why. He said that he needed new glasses, but his parents couldn't afford them. Now as someone who was used to getting what I needed, if not all I wanted, this bothered me. I asked my mother about it that night and she told me that there were agencies who could help. That comforted me and as I recall, within a few weeks he did get new glasses. How, I don't know, but he did get them.

We do justice because God requires it of his people. Sometimes it means we must speak up for those who have no voice. And make no mistake, doing justice is costly. It should be.

Secondly, in true religion God requires us "to love kindness."

The Hebrew word is *hesed*, which denotes undeserved mercy and kindness. *Hesed* is very close to what God has shown us in Jesus.

Now of course, we love kindness when it is shown to us. But what Micah is saying here is "love the quality of kindness in the sense of doing it." If people were kinder to one another, the world would be transformed. It's no accident that kindness is a fruit of the Spirit. Be kind to one another. Treat others as you yourself want to be treated. We may not agree on everything, but we can at least treat each other kindly.

The Bible even tells us to be kind to those who are unkind to us. Exodus 23:5 requires the children of Israel not to oppress strangers--with the reminder that they were once strangers themselves. Jesus went even further than that: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you..." We are to be kind even toward those who are undeserving or ungrateful, just as God has treated us in Christ.

A school teacher by the name of Miss Thompson found it difficult to like Teddy. He was not interested in school. His attitude was so bad that Miss Thompson almost enjoyed the Fs she gave him. In Grade one Teddy had shown some promise. In Grade two, his mother fell seriously ill and Teddy was labelled a slow learner. By Grade four he was far behind. Teddy's father had no for him. At Christmas the students brought Miss Thompson some gifts. Opening Teddy's clumsily wrapped package, she found a gaudy rhinestone bracelet and a bottle of cheap perfume. Seeing that children were giggling at the gift, Miss Thompson put on the bracelet, dabbed some perfume on her wrist and said to them, "Doesn't the perfume smell lovely? Isn't the bracelet beautiful?" That quieted the children. At the end of the school day, Teddy said to the teacher, "Miss Thompson, you smell just like my mother ... and her bracelet looks real pretty on you, too. I'm glad you like my presents." From then on, Miss Thompson began to show more kindness toward that little boy. And he began to improve - both in grades and attitude.

Years later, Miss Thompson received a letter from Teddy telling her that he was graduating from high school - second in his class. Four years later, she received another letter from Teddy telling her that he was graduating from university first in his class. Four years later there was

another letter informing her that he was now Theodore Stollard, M.D. Also, he was getting married and both his parents had died. Would Miss Thompson be willing to sit in his mother's place? On Teddy's wedding day, Miss Thompson sat proudly where Teddy's mother would have sat. That moment of kindness years before had made a huge difference in Teddy's life.

What does the Lord require of you? – to love kindness. That's true religion.

One more thing marks true religion – to walk humbly with your God. In Hebrew, hasnea.

That means recognizing your spiritual need and looking to God to fulfill that need. Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven." Truthfully, we are all poor in spirit; we are all spiritually and morally inadequate. And to know it is to be blessed for then you are open to receiving all the resources of God's Kingdom. The book of Proverbs tells us, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him and he will make straight your paths." Walking humbly with God means knowing that God's ways are higher than our ways and that walking in them is the way of wisdom. True religion – walking not with stubborn independence but walking with God and depending on him.

What does the Lord require of us – "but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God." *Misphat, hesed, hasnea.* And even as God asks to do these things; he gives us the strength to do them. You see, there was once a man from Galilee who always "did justice, loved kindness, and walked humbly with his God." Through his obedience unto death, even death on a cross he brought us salvation. And now the Risen Christ lives with us and in us who name him as Lord. By his grace he puts in us the desire to do these things and by the Holy Spirit he gives us the power to do them, oh often imperfectly, but bending in this direction. This is true religion - "To do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God."