

“What Does the Lord Require of You?”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
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**Micah 6: 1-8**

I know I have said it in the past, but I will always be in a state of deep gratitude and humility for the invitation I received five years ago to participate in the Wabash Pastoral Leadership Program. That program brought me in touch with 17 other pastors in Indiana, and through the generosity of the Lilly Endowment and this congregation’s willingness to let me participate, has enriched my personal outlook on the church and ministry in ways I could never have imagined.

I had the privilege to reunite with many of my friends in ministry this past week at Jameson Camp, here on the west side of Indianapolis. And our guest speaker was Krista Tippett, the host of National Public Radio program “On Being,” a program that speaks of faith and culture through various voices in our world. It was engaging and enlightening to reflect on the church’s role in an increasingly-changing world, and how we might create space for people to wrestle with those changes while experiencing God’s abiding presence in the midst of those changes.

The Wabash Program’s founder, Dr. Raymond Williams, gave the message during our opening worship together on Friday morning. Raymond is now in his late-seventies, and he commented that as he and his contemporaries have aged, they have a tendency to look backwards to how things once were, which in and of itself is not necessarily a bad thing. But for him, he has sought to not only look back on the past, but to also look forward to the future, to what lies ahead, even though he realizes, with his ever-advancing age, that what lies ahead may not be as plentiful due to health or other circumstances. He said this in the context of Hebrews 11: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (11:1). Faith calls us to look forward in hope, not to remain rooted in a past of nostalgia.

That spoke to me specifically as I consider our life in the church. We can often look back on times past with longing and appreciation for what once was: more people filling the pews, children’s programs overflowing our space, funds being raised for ministry, and so on. And the temptation is to either remain in that past of comfort, or to think that we can solve current problems by recreating our past successes. And yet, neither can often address the underlying issues of the present, which are usually drastically different than 25, 10, or even five years ago.

Our response to such ambiguity can vary in the church. Sometimes we fight about what should be done, based on our strongly-held beliefs on the issue. But many times, we choose to live in denial. We insulate ourselves from conflict or risk-taking, choosing what is comfortable or self-soothing. This can happen especially when we reflect too often on what happened in the past. And we can become so comfortable that we forget at times why we are truly here in the first place.

In our text today, the people of Israel had become very comfortable, and God is calling his people to court. God wants them to take account for what they have done in relation to their covenant with him. God has established a covenant with the people which calls for a response by Israel, a response of trust, gratitude and obedience. Yet Israel has not shown such a response, instead causing “a controversy” between God and God’s people.

The Lord calls on all of creation to hear this complaint: “Hear, you mountains, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the Lord has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel” (6:2). And then, God reminds Israel of all that has been done for them by their creator: “I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from slavery; and I send before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam” (6:4). The Lord saved Israel throughout history, keeping them safe and secure. Now, as Israel faces their exile into Babylon, the Lord shows his exasperation.

The people of Israel have broken God’s heart. God has given them so much, sheltered them from harm, and formed a covenant with his children. And while they say all the right things – in their worship and teachings – they have failed to live according to what they say. Worship has become an escape from the real world, and they have neglected to allow God’s Word to penetrate their daily living. That is what can happen when we become so concerned with saying all the right things, while failing to do all the right things.

One commentator writes: *In fact, Micah himself warns of this danger and the judgment that follows the community that becomes skilled at “talking the talk” but not “walking the walk.” The “talk” that Micah critiques in this eighth-century BCE is the exclusive attention paid to the cultic practices of religious faith, without the ethical obedience that faith in Yahweh requires. “With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high?” The question is posed in the cultic arena that Micah deprecates. An escalating list of potential offerings is offered. Burnt offerings? Calves a year old? Thousands of rams? Ten thousand rivers of oil? My firstborn? Micah’s answer, of course, is that none of these symbols of sacrifice pleases God when they are stripped from the context that gives them meaning. God desires more than empty words. God desires justice that is measured by how*

*well the most vulnerable fare in the community, a loyal love that is commensurate with the kind of loyal love that God has shown toward Israel, and a careful walking in one's ethical life* (*Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 1*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2010: 284-286).

What the Lord requires of us is not just what we do within these walls. Last Sunday, each of the women and men who stood before you as elders and deacons for the church in the years ahead were asked the following question: "Will you in your own life seek to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, love your neighbors, and work for the reconciliation of the world?" In other words, as they serve as officers of this church, they are expected to live every day of their life as faithful disciples of Christ, not just when they are at 3000 North High School Road. Micah would ask that question to all of us, for we truly are expected to not only to talk the talk, but also to walk the walk.

What the Lord requires of us is to embody his coming kingdom. What the Lord requires of us is not to forget the lessons of hope and love and justice we preach and teach in the church. What the Lord requires of us is to make those lessons come alive – in our relations with fellow Christians, in our dialogue with people of other faiths, in our relations with friends and strangers alike.

What does the Lord require of us? To show in flesh and blood what God's coming kingdom truly is: the in-breaking of God's mercy and justice, so that the light of the world might illumine the darkness of this world.

As we leave this place today, may we not only talk the talk, but also walk the walk of faith, doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly everyday with the Lord our God. Amen.