

What Good Does the Lord Expect?

Micah 6: 1-8

Matthew 5: 1-12

I expect certain things when the kids start streaming into a class where I'm substituting. I expect the smart guys and gals, the ones who are sure they can run the substitute and get the sub to let them do whatever they want because the sub doesn't know like they know, right? They're sure that they have the upper hand. These are the ones that I expect will keep me busy.

Then there are the ones who are delighted there's a sub either because they won't have to listen to the same teacher, or they won't be following the usual lesson plan, or they know I'll at least be different. They have expectations of me.

Our expectations are shaped by our assumptions. I assume that the kid who is mouthy with me before I have even called the attendance roll requires a fast lesson in who's boss. I tell them it's my class and my rules. This typically has to do with seating, because the sub doesn't know that the chair with screechy wheels isn't used by any student.

When they tell me that it isn't my class, that it's Ms. So-and-so's class, I know I have a smart guy or gal. Then it's time for lesson number 2: "Do you **see** Ms. So-and-so here. No? That's why it's **my** class today. **Move** to a standard desk **now**." I expect that they would have learned a bit more about me and would adjust their conduct. Many would.

However, if they fail to meet expectation and persist in giving me grief, I move their seat one more time. As they take their seat, I give them a semi-private warning by reciting the facts of substitute teacher life: "Son, I don't get paid more money to put up with your garbage; I don't get paid less money for throwing you out of my class. You decide what happens because it doesn't matter to me." This is most persuasive when delivered in a softer tone of voice because when I'm finished there is a delightful silence in the whole room because every student made sure that they hear just what I said to the smart guy.

I have to come to expect that Friday classes are going to get progressively worse as the afternoon wears on. It doesn't matter what class or whose class or who the students are. The last couple of periods are going to be all wound up in expectation of the end of the school week and the freedom of the weekend. These classes I expect will stink, and I'm going to be bellowing a lot.

Expectations are how we plan, predict, prepare, and measure up. Those customer service feedback forms often have boxes for "meets expectations," or "exceeds expectations." If *someone* or *something* "fails to meet expectations," you can expect to get a complaint.

This would seem to be the case with God's evaluation of God's people. They've failed to meet expectations, and God has a complaint.

In the opening verses of chapter 6, God sets the stage of his courtroom: *Stand up, plead your case before the mountains, let the hills hear what you have to say ... For the Lord has a case against his people.*

Going to court when God has a case against you isn't very wise. This is one you really should be settling before going to court. Anyway, here comes the charge.

We need to read between the lines a bit because God says: *My people, what have I done to you? How have I burdened you? Answer me.* God then proceeds to recount a brief history of their relationship together. It recalls the exodus from Egypt and the ministry of Moses, and the episode of Balak and Balaam that brought them great blessings upon seizing the Promised Land. God keeps asking them to remember. There's only one reason for that: God's people seem to have forgotten their story together with God. Frankly it seems unlikely that they've actually forgotten these stories, like some sad, lost group of amnesiacs. No, they haven't actually forgotten, however they're behaving like they don't know these stories of their relationship with God. They're acting as if God is some stranger with whom they have no meaningful relationship. Let's go further and see what else we can discover.

Verses 6 and 7 present the defense of God's people in response to God's complaint (and we're not altogether sure what the exact nature of the complaint is right now). It would seem that God's people don't really understand why God is complaining. They sound blameless, in their own eyes anyway. They worship regularly; they make the prescribed offerings. What does God want? Does God want more? A thousand rams perhaps? Ten thousand rivers of oil? A sin offering of my first born perhaps? Is that what God wants? Will that make God happy and get God to withdraw this baseless complaint?

Now the prophet Micah intercedes to tell the people what they don't understand. *[God] has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.*

We've all heard that verse a whole bunch of times. It's a great, very memorable line, and definitely one of my favorite Bible passages. But let's be sure to connect the dots and bring this message home to roost. We'll take this step-by-step.

God complains about being estranged in effect from God's own people. They don't seem to want to have anything to do with God or what God wants. God's people come back and ask in effect, what's your problem? We do the worship, we offer prayers, worship, sacrifice, the whole nine yards. What do you want? More sacrifices? More offerings? My first born? Is that going to get you off our backs.

God's people have completely equated whatever they do in religious devotion, like attending worship, putting money in the plate, and generally doing whatever they think

God would want, like being nice, polite, generous, thoughtful, and that kind of thing. Regular worship and being a good citizen, that's all God wants from us.

First off, the prophet explains that God has shown you what is **good**. We're going to need to define "good" a bit better, but it would seem that "good" for God has nothing to do with this worship stuff they've been so occupied with.

Then comes: "And what does the Lord **require** of you?" This implicitly responds to the peoples' belief that they are doing everything that has been required or expected from them. They are doing some awesome worship stuff, great sacrifices, solid donations, lots of prayers, superior singing, and even some sermons that didn't put everyone to sleep. The people are sure that they're doing everything they can, *and* that they're doing everything right.

Except when the expectation gets laid out, there is nothing about worship there. It's all about active personal participation in creating a better world, in creating the pathway to the Kingdom of God – justice, mercy, and humility.

Where God's people thought that they were doing everything right, it turns out that they were totally missing the point, not even close. The disturbing connection between Micah 6 and every-church-in 2017-USA is that we've totally missed the point in the exact same way. We think that we're all good with God if we're doing worship, because God likes nothing better than to hear you sing music, pray for your family and friends, sit through the sermon, and put money in the plate week after week. God's people think that this is God's primary expectation.

There is only one problem. Nowhere does Jesus say anything about attending worship as having *any* priority for his followers. In fact, I don't think he actually says *anywhere* that believers should attend worship. It's like he didn't think that sanctuaries and rituals had any real value, and certainly not primary value, like we've given it. Acts of worship and devotion don't belong in a sanctuary according to Micah, but in the daily living of a faithful life doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with your God.

When Jesus gives the Sermon on the Mount, we wouldn't notice that Jesus says nothing rally about regular worship attendance as one of the blessings. Where is "Blessed are you when you attend services each week"? Did he miss that one? Or was he dealing with the same ritual based mentality that the prophet Micah was coping with?

An episode of a new podcast that I like summed it up perfectly. It was entitled, "Flip the Script." Both the prophet and Jesus are flipping the script. Where religious devotion by God's people has been defined by their ritual participation, by withdrawing into sanctuaries to show God how faithful they are, these guys flip the script and say the opposite. The faithful are the ones who engage life, society, and the world, sacrificing, healing, feeding, housing, clothing, teaching, protesting, prophesying, advocating, and laying their lives on the line like the Orthodox priest in Kiev on the cover who is living the beatitude, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons [and daughters] of God."

It is through the experience of ministry together that a community of actively faithful people joins together in thanksgiving and praise of the God whom they serve day in and day out. Worship is not separated as a time apart, but as a celebration within a continuum of active ministry. Worship is not the priority, the inspiration, the driver of behavior, but the result, the outcome of days of service to the Kingdom, of shared experience in the struggle to help people reach for God's promise for them and resist the powers of worldly oppression and denigration and exploitation.

“Blessed are you when you suffer the consequences of being a faithful servant of the Kingdom” is one way of summarizing the beatitudes. It takes the tag line of Micah 6:8 – “Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God” – and takes it one step further. In the Beatitudes, Jesus acknowledges the vehement, violent, vicious response that the world gives to those who try to flip the script with their faithful defiance and compassionate resistance. Jesus flips the script by saying for all the suffering the faithful endure for the sake of the advancement of the Kingdom, for all of the negative stuff that the world will throw at you, God will bless you in many ways for your faithful devotion in service.

I think I'll stop there and pick up this thread next week when the scriptures again turn us to matters of devotion and service as the script gets flipped again.