

Trinity United Methodist Church

July 5, 2020

“Bill of Responsibilities”

Pastor Dan Elmore

Scripture: Micah 6:6-8 (NIV)

6 With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? **7** Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of olive oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? **8** He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

Sermon

Would you pray with me? Oh Lord, open our ears and our hearts. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

So again, we worship on this Independence Day weekend. And Independence Day is a favorite holiday of many. This Independence Day I have found myself ever more thankful for our country in which we live, but also ever more prayerful for this country. Independence Day is all about celebrating freedom and the freedoms that we enjoy. But I think this Independence Day we see just how far we still have yet to go in that cause. Because of the pandemic, we couldn't celebrate Independence Day in the usual ways of fireworks and parades and such; you might have gone to the drive-in fireworks last night at the county fairgrounds. I did not want to get stuck in that kind of traffic.

But how might we celebrate Independence Day a different way? Particularly as followers of Jesus? Part of celebrating the freedoms that we enjoy is knowing our history and our documents, such as our Bill of Rights. The Bill of Rights was written to protect individual freedoms from violation by the federal or national government. And I'll spare the longer history lesson, but I bring this up to say that in all the matters swirling around us today of racism, of protests, of instances of police brutality, the removal of statues and more—in all of this, what I continue to hear is an argument from the standpoint of *rights*. That whatever the issue is, the responses that we're seeing from the people and

from the government are an infringement of our rights. We need to stand up for our rights. We need to stand up for our Constitution. But I wonder if all the people most advocating for these things have actually read our Constitution lately.

As an American citizen, I share some of these concerns in some instances. But more importantly, as followers of Jesus, how might we respond? How can we celebrate our freedom, not just as American citizens, but as citizens of heaven, first and foremost, made free by the Spirit of the Lord and the Gospel of Jesus Christ? How might our country be healed by the same?

We turn to our text for the day. The context in which we find the book of Micah is in which the nation, the biblical nation of Israel, was in trouble. The successful attacks of foreign invaders were viewed as God's judgment on the people for turning away from him. Prophets like Micah were sent to warn the people, to encourage them to turn back to God. And in chapter 6, God asks the people: "What have I done to you? I brought you out of Egypt, I redeemed you from slavery, I gave you leadership, I saved you from enemies previously. Why have you turned away from me?" And through the voice of the prophet, the people ask in a sorrowful way—and I love this version from *The Message*—"How can I stand up before God and show proper respect to the High God? Should I bring an armload of offerings topped off with yearling calves? Would God be impressed with thousands of rams, with buckets and barrels of olive oil? Would he be moved if I sacrificed my firstborn child, my precious baby, to cancel my sin?"

These people, through the prophet, have indeed become sorrowful enough that they are willing to sacrifice their children, like other cultures around them. And if not that, to at least bring extravagant offerings and sacrifices in what amounts to more religious ritual. But through the prophet, God answers them. "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God."

Friends, this Independence Day weekend, we certainly realize that our nation is in trouble, the likes of which some of us haven't seen in our lifetimes. Our lives have been invaded by this virus, and our souls are being attacked by vitriol, hatred, and division. We people of faith certainly know that we need God's help more than ever. And so what should we do? Should we offer up some huge sacrifice to God? Should we tear down the idols that we've made, both actual ones and the ones in our hearts? It's a start.

But God still speaks through the prophet Micah to us today. God has shown us what is good, what God wants, what God *requires* of us. To act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God.

To **act justly**. First of all, to *act*. Another translation says to *do justice*. To act or to do—in other words, to *do something* about the issues around us and the inequalities

that we see in all kinds of ways. To not just talk about it and talk a good game, but to actually do something to make a difference. And to do justice—justice, the meaning of which is *that which is right*. To do that which is right.

I once read that Gerald Ford, in his decision making, in the midst of everything all of his advisors were telling him he should do, he would ask, “What’s the right thing to do?” And many believe it was that question that led to his pardon of his predecessor, Richard Nixon. Not because Nixon wasn’t a crook, but because it was the right thing to do, to allow our country to move on.

It’s sometimes hard to know what’s the right thing to do. And we have the arsenal of prayer with us, so we can ask God what *is* the right thing to do in whatever situation we face. And just a warning: When you follow that as best as you can, you’ll often be misunderstood by those around you.

Secondly, we are to **love mercy**. The actual Hebrew word there is “chesed,” which is usually translated as, “God’s steadfast love,” “God’s everlasting faithfulness.” That we’re to love that. You see, in context, Israel had broken the covenant, the relationship that God had established with them. God was offering to restore that relationship, but in return, they needed to love God as faithfully as God had loved them. God offers to restore a relationship with him and us to all of us through his son, Jesus Christ. So we need to love God just as faithfully back to God.

But remember, Jesus also said that the love of God is equal to the love of neighbor. So just as we are to faithfully love God, we are to just as faithfully love our neighbor. Just as we love the mercy that God continues to give us through the forgiveness of our sins, we are to love our neighbors with that same mercifulness, with that same grace. Oh, if we might do that more. How faithful are we in our love of neighbor? Not just those who agree with us. How faithful are we at loving our neighbor, especially those who are crying out in pain?

And then lastly, we’re to **walk humbly**. And it is enough if we were to just stop there with *walk humbly*. Because in an outrage culture in which we live, in which we’re expected to be outraged at just about anything and everything in ever-increasing amounts, we could use, all of us, a big old dose of humility. And remember: **Humility is not thinking less of ourselves, but humility is thinking of ourselves less.** Again, humility is not thinking less of ourselves—it’s not putting ourselves down at the expense of others—it’s thinking of *ourselves less* so that we can *lift up others even more*. It means to be teachable. To listen to perspectives different from your own. And by the way—I’ve got to go there—posting videos of persons of color that are expressing a viewpoint with which you already agree? That’s not the same as listening to people with

a different perspective. *Be teachable, and learn from those who think very differently from you.*

But not just to walk humbly with each other, but specifically to **walk humbly with your God**. And how do we do that? We do that through our spiritual disciplines. How are our prayer lives going in the midst of all the craziness around us? If there was ever a time to be doubling down in prayer, it is *now*. To open ourselves in prayer so that we might be teachable by God.

And through it all we might still say, “But what about our *rights*?” Friends, rights are important. But what if our rights aren’t actually the most important part of what our country needs right now to heal? What if, instead of focusing on a Bill of Rights and those rights that we think are in there or might not be in there, what if we actually took on a sort of Bill of Responsibilities—to our God and to our neighbors and to ourselves?

Paul writes in Galatians chapter 5 (*The Message* translation): “It is absolutely clear that God has called you to a free life. Just make sure that you don’t use this freedom as an excuse to do whatever you want to do and destroy your freedom. Rather, use your freedom to serve one another in love; that’s how freedom grows. For everything we know about God’s Word is summed up in a single sentence: Love others as you love yourself. That’s an act of true freedom. If you bite and ravage each other, watch out—in no time at all you will be annihilating each other, and where will your precious freedom be then?”

Friends, God has told us what we need to do. In *all* that we do, secular or sacred: **To act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God.** May it be so.

Thanks be to God. Amen.