

THE SHORT LIST

Micah 6:1-8

Matthew 5:1-12

Sometimes it helps to have a “short list” to limit your options, get focused, set the right priorities. The “presumptive” presidential candidates McCain and Obama are working on their vice-presidential short lists these days. A 12 Step Program helps many people overcome addiction. The ancient Greeks cultivated four cardinal virtues: wisdom, courage, temperance and justice. Medieval theologians warned of seven deadly sins. You rise on a sunny Saturday morning with the whole day ahead. Your spouse gives you a “to do” list to save you from the sin of sloth! Yes, in the face of life’s endless options a short list helps.

Our Scripture texts today are two of the most famous short lists in the Bible. The Beatitudes are Jesus’ prescription for a life that is “blessed.” The word means happy and whole. The prophet Micah poses a crucial question: “What does the Lord require of you?” and responds with his short list. It is said that Micah 6 verse 8 was Abraham Lincoln’s favorite Bible verse. It is one of two verses quoted in the Covenant of this Congregation, which has focused the vision of this church for almost fifty years.

What does the Lord require of you but to do justice,
to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.

God has given each of us a precious individuality and a wide variety of gifts. There are many ways to serve and grow as we wend our spiritual journey. But three things are required of all who would walk in the way of the Lord. Doing justice is the first requirement. The Hebrew word for it, *mishpat*,

appears over and over, one the key words in the Old Testament.

“What does the Lord require but to do justice . . .” The Bible’s short lists are not rigid rules to be obeyed. They are road maps to reality, different ways of seeing and being in the world. They offer what Marcus Borg calls “an alternative consciousness.” “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” “Blessed are the merciful.” “Blessed are the peacemakers.” We encounter the Bible and come to church to have our priorities challenged, lest we accept the conventional wisdom that the race is for the swift and every battle won by the strong. So, what is this justice that’s required?

We have a symbol of justice in our western culture. You see it atop county court houses across the land and on the Supreme Court building in Washington. Justice is a solitary figure in a flowing robe, blindfolded and holding a scale. Human justice is blind, balanced, rational and supposedly fair. In the name of human justice African-American slaves were defined as three-fifths of a person in the U.S. Constitution, women were denied full voting rights until 1920. And third-world nations today are so indebted to developed nations that the subsistence of their people is threatened. It’s all perfectly legal! Blind, impartial, rational justice can be unfair. That’s the theme of Denzel Washington’s fine new film, *The Great Debaters*. If you haven’t seen it, don’t miss it.

The justice God requires is not blind or balanced, cool or calculating. “Let justice roll down like a waterfall and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24) cried Amos, a contemporary of the prophet Micah. Biblical justice is like a torrent, a powerful, passionate force. Justice is no mere ideal or human virtue. Justice is God’s urgent agenda

in human history. It's not what the People's Court decides but what God is doing to make things right and set people free. That's biblical justice and it's radical stuff. The Roman historian Tacitus wrote, "The gods are on the side of the stronger." The gods always support the rulers, the elites, the people holding political and economic power. That was the dominant view in the ancient world. Indeed, kings, potentates and pharaohs were viewed as gods. Until the Hebrews, the people of Israel, a weak and unlikely lot had a new epiphany, experience, encounter with God. The heart of the living God, the creator God, the only God is really on the side of the weak, the poor and the put upon in this world.

One of my most enjoyable duties as a minister here was to teach the Confirmation Class almost every year. Those teenagers were great. And how I drummed it into them: "What is the really big event, the most important happening in the entire Old Testament?" It is called the Exodus. The Exodus is for Jews what the resurrection is for Christians—the main event, the greatest demonstration of God's saving power and purpose, an incredible story! The Lord of the universe hears the cry of pitiful, powerless nobodies, helpless brickyard slaves. The Lord routs Pharaoh and his superpower army. The Lord sets people free. That's the paradigm of justice and it's required in every age.

Justice is God's compassion for a trinity that's mentioned so often in the Old Testament: the widow, the orphan and the alien, the foreigner. They had no power in Israel. They were often abused and exploited because they had no male relative in that ancient man's world. Over and over we read that the Lord was on their side. How well are the weakest and poorest in our society faring? That's the question biblical justice always asks.

Conventional wisdom today thinks of justice as **retribution**—punishing criminals. The Bible knows of such justice. Locking up sociopaths is necessary and just. But biblical justice runs much deeper. Today a higher percentage of Americans are in prison, yet we have higher rates of violent crime than many other countries. **Biblical justice is about distribution far more than retribution.** Not building more prisons but leveling the playing field, distributing the resources of the world’s richest country fairly. I meet them everyday at Bethesda House—the working poor, working every day yet hungry or homeless or lacking medical care. Our caseworkers counsel them but the costs of rent and food and other necessities always exceed their low wage income. We’ve seen new outbreaks of violence in this city and across urban America. Does anyone connect the dots? When justice is denied, a society begins to disintegrate. What does the Lord require? I could quote a thousand verses. One from Psalm 82 will do:

“You must stop judging unjustly;
You must no longer be partial to the wicked.
Defend the rights of the poor and the orphan;
be fair to the needy and the helpless.
Rescue them from the power of the wicked.”

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann writes:
“Biblical justice means to sort out what belongs to whom and return it to them.” It’s about fair distribution. Many social critics have pointed out that the extremes of wealth and poverty are greater in America today than at any time since the Great Gatsby. A prominent poll last week found that 8 out of 10 Americans believe our country is headed in the wrong direction. Perhaps we need to revise the short lists we live by. “What does the Lord require but to do justice. . .

“and to love kindness.” Social criticism is important. But it is not enough. Justice is as close to love as society and government can come. We must push for it. But the poet Auden gave a wise warning: “We dare not dream of systems so perfect that people don’t have to be good.” Government should be just but government can’t do it all. People need to be good, honest, caring. “To do justice and to love kindness—that’s the second requirement. Our English word kindness is a rather weak translation of a powerful Hebrew word. That word doesn’t mean being “nice” but being loyal, dependable, trustworthy. It’s used most often to describe God’s dependable love for Israel and all humanity, a tough, tireless love for disobedient people that refuses to give up on them. God is kind, even though we humans break God’s law, stone God’s prophets, crucify God’s Son, and drive the nails deeper with our behavior every day. God keeps working to set people free, to change our vision, to resurrect us with Christ. God never gives up on us or the world and that’s what loving kindness means. I saw a sermon title on a church signboard recently: “God’s Got Your Back.” That’s it.

Because we’re loved like that we must love other people like that. To “love kindness” means not to give up on other people. It’s to assume the best, not the worst. It’s to stop blaming the victims and become their patient helper, because God is our help every day. To love kindness is to do unto others, not as they deserve, but as God has done to us. And it’s required.

“To do justice, to love kindness, and to walk **humbly** with our God.” This last item on Micah’s short list is interesting. Humility is the slipperiest of virtues. The moment I think I have it (I’m so humble, isn’t that great!), I’ve probably lost it. Biblical humility is not low self-esteem,

either. The verb “to walk humbly” is very rare in the Hebrew Bible. It doesn’t mean to walk with our head down, looking down on ourselves or others. To walk humbly with God means to walk closely with a greater Companion, not to look down but to look up and travel with a higher Trust.

I’m convinced that much of the unfairness in our world is not the result of greed but of fear. Most people want the hungry to be fed, the poor housed, the disabled treated with dignity, and children to have hope—but at what cost? Higher taxes??? Oh, no!!! We fear that improvements in someone else’s security may come at the expense of our own. So, this walk with God is the key to social justice and personal compassion. To walk humbly with God is to experience a higher Security than our securities, a trust more dependable than our trusts, a care that frees us to share. Jesus said and lived it, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, God’s close partners in this world, for all the riches of the kingdom will be theirs.”

You dear people lead busy lives. You are a very active church. Remember your covenant. Remember the short list. And in this coming political season remind America to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with God. That’s the right direction and it’s required.

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Sermon by Robert A. White
First Reformed Church
Schenectady, New York
June 22, 2008

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE
June 22, 2008

Eternal God, we thank you
for changing seasons and for summer's change of pace;
for books to read, minds to think, and hearts to love;
for parents, family and friends near when we need them;
for the surprising strength that comes
 just when we have a heavy load to carry;
for the promise that you go with
 in sunshine and in shadow to the end;
for all the blessings of life, O God, we praise your holy name.

Hear now our prayers for people in need on the threshold of summer:
for teachers still grading exams;
for college graduates in search of a job;
for children finding little fresh air and much danger
 on inner city streets;
for the sick in hospital rooms, the elderly in nursing homes
 and all who care for them;
for those who mourn and those who comfort them.
Be near to all who call upon you, O God,
 and to those who forget to call.

Bless this First Church congregation and their ministers.
Go with us all in the opportunities and pressures of this new week.
Help us carve out quiet spaces in our lives and meet us there.
For our work give us energy.
In our leisure give us rest.
In our weakness be our strength.
In our victories help us be humble.
In our searching let us find.
And in all things be our God,
 through Jesus Christ our Lord, who taught us to pray:
 "Our Father . . ."

Robert A. White