

“The Puzzling Proposition”

Micah 6:1-8

Hear what the LORD says: Rise, plead your case
before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice.

Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the LORD,
and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the LORD
has a controversy with his people,
and God will contend with Israel.

“O my people, what have I done to you?
In what have I wearied you? Answer me!
For I brought you up from the land of Egypt,
and redeemed you from the house of slavery;
and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.

O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised,
what Balaam son of Beor answered him,
and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal,
that you may know the saving acts of the LORD.”

“With what shall I come before the LORD,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before God with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?

Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?

Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”

God 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?

The Puzzling Proposition

Micah 6:1-8

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I.

In my experience, just getting started is *always* the hardest thing to do. As it is often said, the first step *is* a doozy. After that, everything seems to fall in place. Or, conversely, you find yourself tumbling headlong into the abyss and, in such a moment, the particulars of *why* you came to be falling seem rather beside the point. While this is true of just about every area of human endeavor, I find it particularly evident every time I sit down to write a sermon. Consequently, I tend to grasp at any straw of an idea that comes to mind, which often results in some fairly tangential thinking on my part but, I hope, a certain degree of amusement on yours (we shall see).

II.

As for today's sermon, the straw I'm grasping is the German Existentialist philosopher Frederick Nietzsche. I am quite sure I'm in a very small minority of those who made the leap to ministry due in large part to Nietzsche; though, I hope, there are more than the few who would be willing admit this. Nietzsche is a towering figure in philosophy who gets blamed for an awful lot. While this may or may not be justified, I took a shine to him almost immediately as he seemed to be a "say it like it is" kind of person. That is, he was a truth teller.

He also made great use of the literary device known as the *aphorism*: a pithy and astute observation that contains a general truth or principle, such as, "The first step is a doozy." After reading the dense machinations, and what I considered to be the unnecessary obfuscations of Kant, Kierkegaard and Hume, I remember that Nietzsche seemed to me to be a much needed breath of fresh air.

III.

Perhaps the most scandalous of Nietzsche's aphorisms has a nice ring to it in the original German: "Gott ist tot"; which translates as "God is dead." How about *that* for pithy and astute? Nietzsche used the phrase to express his idea

that the Enlightenment had eliminated the possibility of the existence of God. Meaning, in the burgeoning Age Of Reason, there was no room for such a non-rational concept.

While most heard the sentiment that “God is dead” as a scandal or a sacrilege, I found it as release from a prison 2000 years in the making. Though it is true Nietzsche thought he was heralding the end of the road I, instead, heard it as the first step on an entirely new path which promised a journey of countless possibilities: that God was now set free to be what God actually was/is, rather than the God we humans were making out of our own image; a God that was human, all too human.

IV.

Incidentally, Human, All Too Human, is the title of one my favorite of Nietzsche’s books, and the straw of an idea at which I grasped to start today’s sermon given our scripture reading this morning, Micah 6:1-8, which served to remind me that all too often we are all too human. Like any number of the philosophers I’ve read, we humans delight in over-complication. Whatever “it” is, we make *everything* a BIG deal. We have to examine it, poke it, prod it, probe it, chew on it, mull it over in our minds, hold it in our hearts, seek to understand, strive to gain perspective, dig for the truth, wait for the right time and, of course, talk about it *ad nauseam*. And, so, in our humanity we ceaselessly consternate to seek solutions to problems which do not exist and, for the most part, find life to be a very puzzling proposition indeed. That is to say, we always seem to make things harder than they need to be. Which, by way of demonstration, was the purpose in formatting today’s bulletin backwards, and in crafting this morning’s hymns.

V.

As I told the kids, we humans by our nature very much enjoy a good puzzle. We are innately curious creatures who are driven to make sense of our world, find our place in it and, to a lesser degree, seek to understand our own selves. In celebration of this biological and psychological trait, someone had the bright idea of designating January 29th as National Puzzle Day in recognition of the value puzzles have in stimulating and activating brain cells and, depending on the puzzle, helping to develop and hone social interactive skills as well.

When Linda, our Newsletter Editor, was seeking to provide some filler for the January Sundays of the Month section on the cover page, a quick internet search revealed that the 5th Sunday of January this year happened to fall on National Puzzle Day. Today is also National Corn Chip Day, but in an effort to grasp a straw, I decided National Puzzle Day would make more hay; particularly when I saw today's lectionary reading from Micah.

VI.

Written with a certain tone of exasperation combined with sarcasm and a dash of amusement, in my opinion, the first 8 verses of Micah chapter 6 initially seeks to state, as a puzzle, the controversy brewing between God and the People; and, then, goes on to resolve the conflict and solve the puzzle in aphoristic fashion.

Referencing an historical incident recorded in the book of Numbers involving King Balak of Moab and the prophet Balaam of the donkey beating fame (long story), Micah reiterates King Balak's question about how one comes to know the righteousness of God; which, to him, was a very puzzling proposition indeed:

*“With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before God with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?
Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”*

VII.

Clearly, King Balak is not alone in asking such a question, as it is the very same question that has been asked, and *continues* to be asked, by countless generations. In many ways, the question of how to attain God's righteousness, and dwell within it, is at the core of the human experience; it is that about which we are most curious. Of course, in our all too humanness we make the puzzle *way* harder than it needs to be. The solution, found in Micah 6:8, is as elegant in its simplicity as it is straightforward in its application: *“God 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?”* Even Nietzsche would be compelled to admit this is pretty darn pithy, and, oh so astute; an aphorism for the ages.

VIII.

Of course, the fact that we are all sitting here today is testament to the fact that this solution to the puzzling proposition didn't so much fall on deaf ears as it caused us to keep probing the cavity with our tongue. We humans just cannot stop ourselves from making *everything* a BIG deal: Well, what is justice? Specifically? How do we "love kindness," as you say? What do you mean, "walk humbly with your God?" Where? How?

While these are not necessarily inappropriate questions to be asking, they betray the overwhelming desire to merely continue to *play* the puzzle rather than seeking to actually *solve* the puzzle. *Playing* the puzzle is a great source of distraction and diversion; it reduces the spiritual life to mere sport or amusement. *Solving* the puzzle means one has to move on from the theoretical and embrace the practical; it elevates the spiritual life to sacred labor and the highest form of artistic expression.

IX.

All of that said, I *love* a good puzzle and so to close today let us endeavor together solve this one. Justice begins with, and results in, truth telling. Even the deepest truths lie barely beneath the surface of our lives; and, with rare exception, each and everyone of us can see right through to them. The puzzlement arises not out of an inability to discern, but from the proposition of needing to have the courage to simply "say it like it is" regardless of cost or consequence; and, then, to act in accordance with whatever "specifics" may follow. Far too many people put the cart before the horse, waiting to "know" justice before they feel they can "do" justice. Instead, if we would simply "do" justice we would discover, in *very* short order, everything we seek to know about justice.

X.

Thursday morning, in the midst of the latest snowstorm and while the rest of the world was shoveling and trying to get to work or school, I spirited myself away to the quiet of my office to gain ground on some administrative tasks. After 25 years, I have a pretty good sense of the creaks and groans of this old building and what is going on within its walls. That morning I heard someone enter the foyer and then, over a span of an hour or so, occasionally move around in the narthex; which is somewhat atypical and, at a point, became a kind of puzzle to me.

Curious, I ventured up the first few stairs and gave a “Yoo Hoo” through the spindles. Turns out there was a fellow up in our library passing time and sheltering from the storm. The magnetic strip on his bank card had cracked and he was unable to use it to gas his tank and had spent the previous night sleeping in his car at the Steward’s on Gouveneur Street. He had requested a replacement be mailed to the Canton Post Office, and hoped it would arrive the following day.

XI.

I asked him what his plan was between now and then? He said he’d sleep in his car again tonight, and then added, somewhat sheepishly, and spend the day here at the church. Now, I have had such a conversation many times over the years with folks and I always appreciate people just telling me like it is. After a long pause, I asked if he would like a cup of coffee? “Absolutely,” he responded. I then asked if he had eaten breakfast? “I haven’t eaten since yesterday,” he replied. I made coffee, took him into the food pantry and invited him to take whatever he wished (which was one small bag), then I walked him up to the kitchen so he could fix himself some of it to eat.

All the while this was happening, I was asking questions. He was a local person, clean, well kept, polite and currently without a place to call home. My take was he is a decent guy who was in a tight spot and, though unfathomable to me, had no one to call upon for help and, so, came here at our church (good guess).

XII.

Finally, I asked him how much money he would need to get him where he was going? He cited what I consider to be a very modest sum. I gave him twice that. Correction, YOU gave him twice that. He looked at me with a mix of amazement and disbelief and said, “I haven’t seen that much money in a *long* time.” I left him alone in the kitchen and went back to work in my office. After fixing himself some food and cleaning up after himself (I checked) I heard him gather his things and quietly head out the door into the world.

Which give me no small amount of relief, because it meant not having to explain to all of you how I allowed a guy to spend the night on the couch in our newly dedicated “Lorna’s Lounge.” I would have, though, if push came to shove; and you *know* I would have. But *I* knew that would have been ok with

all of you because ours is a church which understands that loving kindness is usually not the *easy* thing to do, but it is always the *right* thing to do.

XIII.

Finally, I had a phone conversation last week with Rich Grayson, who is the chair of this year's Nominating Committee. I was preparing the Annual Report and wanted to be sure we were on the same page with regard to who was going off the Board of Deacons and the Session, and those being nominated to fill their seats. We talked, first, about the Deacons and, then, moved to the Session. I tend to keep my nose out of such matters. While it has never been an issue here, I know some churches where the minister attempts to influence the outcome.

As a result, I really had not noticed that along with Martha Cole, who has served the church with both glee and great effort in countless ways over the entire span of my pastorate, Rich was also going off the Session. He said to me, "This will be my last year." I said, "I know, you've served two full terms and have to sit out a year." Rich allowed a long silence which gave me time to catch up to what was *really* being said. He is 84, this would be his last year... *ever*.

XIV.

Well, I'm here to tell you, *that* particular pebble rippled in the pond of my soul for many days. It was a fresh reminder to me that time is marching on not just in *my* life but, also, in the lives of those I know and love here at our church. I also realized that for 25 years now, Rich Grayson has perfectly embodied the sentiments expressed in Micah about walking humbly with your God. Once we solve the puzzle, once we discover what is good and understand what the Lord requires, humility is the *only* road which remains open to us, and walk it we must; such is the spiritual journey upon which we have all embarked. Rich, thank you for walking with me, and with all of us for so many these years here at our church.

Finally, having begun the sermon with Nietzsche, it is fitting we end with one of his aphorisms: "*And those who were seen dancing were thought to be insane by those who could not hear the music.*" Make that first step a dance step. Amen.