

29 January 2023

Welcome / Announcements / Land Acknowledgement

We recognize that the land where we gather for worship belongs to God, as does all of creation. We also know that this is the unceded territory of the Lkwungen and WSÁNEĆ people. As we pray, reflect, and celebrate in this place, we do so as guests lamenting the injustice in our history. We ask that the God of love and justice lead us along the path of reconciliation, bringing accountability and healing. May we be inspired to forge new relationships of respect and solidarity.

➤ *For mornings bright (verses 1 and 4)*

Call to Worship

God calls us to seek justice:

Let Christ's love for the poor and hungry fill the earth.

God calls us to show kindness,

Let Christ's light shine in places of brokenness and despair.

God calls us to walk humbly in the Spirit,

Let us join the work of the kingdom in humility and hope.

Called, blessed and inspired, let us worship God together.

† Gathering Prayer and Words of Hope

God of our lives, you are always turning the world upside down – challenging us to follow you into new ventures – new challenges – new ways to care – new ways to touch the hearts of all. When we get tired or feel disappointed – remind us that you can bring change and hope out of the most difficult situations, so that we may do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with you always.

We have heard it said: *Look after number one... Get them before they get you... Better be safe than sorry... What does someone else's problem have to do with me? Only the strong survive... Money makes the world go 'round... Revenge is sweet... Avoid pain at all costs...*

Merciful God, forgive us when we – as Christ's own people – believe these words to be life-giving when Jesus has shown us a better way. Guide and keep us in this better way. Amen

Jesus gathers us – turns to listen to our voices – reaches out to touch us – to embrace us. Jesus shows us that we are forgiven – worthy of love and respect. Thanks be to God

† Prayer for Understanding

Holy God, your people turn to your Word for truth and guidance in every age. Send your Holy Spirit to inspire our understanding of your Scripture, read and interpreted today. Help us hear the truth for our lives and our times through Christ, your Living Word. Amen

Scripture **Micah 6: 1-8** [OT 866]

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 he 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 him 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?"

He 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?

1 Corinthians 1: 18-31 [NT 166]

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world

did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe.

For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.

He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

Matthew 5: 1-12 [NT 4]

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil
against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in
heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

Message

Have you ever been to a concert with a fantastic light show – all glitz and glamour but the acoustics were definitely sub-par? Or gone for a special dinner only to find that while the meal was prettily presented and followed all the latest food trends, everything lacked flavour? Have you ever known someone who was unerringly polite and proper but you never got to know them – never broke through the veneer to encounter the real person? These are examples of style over substance – looks and presentation taking center stage and leaving the heart of something empty and lifeless.

The expression is often used to criticize something that is very strong aesthetically but fails on the story, intellectual or emotional aspects. Style is how you deliver something. Substance is what you deliver. I remember one student's social studies assignment – beautiful and creative – inscribed on real birch bark – but so lacking in content that his mark was far lower than he had hoped. He spent all his time working on how to present the project and very little on the material he was asked to demonstrate an understanding of.

We do this in the church sometimes. We worry about what instruments we will use in worship or about the strength of our choir instead of giving thanks for every voice in the congregation raised in praise. We fuss about the way we serve communion – is this the right way? The way we did it in our childhood? Instead of celebrating the grace of the table and welcoming everyone with open hearts. Candles or no candles? Clapping or silent reflection? Formal or informal? We get caught up in worshipping in a certain place, at a specific time, following a particular order of service when we know in our heart of hearts that what counts is participating in God's love for the world every day and joining for worship that sustains and encourages us. Style or substance – what really matters?

The readings from Matthew, Micah and Paul's letter to the Corinthians are all advocating for substance – for a way of life and a relationship with the living God that focuses on what is truly important. In the Beatitudes – the blessings – we are reminded to value meekness and mercy, righteousness, purity and peacemaking – we are upheld in our weak moments and our grief – when we are oppressed and falsely accused, God embraces us. Paul tells us not to worry if we look foolish in the eyes of the world since divine criteria is all about substance – the quality of our relationship with Jesus – the salvation that causes us to live with love in a world too caught up in style and pretence. And Micah probably lays it out the most clearly and succinctly – do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with God.

What does it mean, though? How do we do these things? What is justice, and kindness – or mercy as it is often translated, and humility?

To walk humbly with God seems the place to start – seems to help put the other two requirements into context. We need to develop that intimate relationship of awe and reverence as we journey through life with our divine creator. We need to adjust our attitudes first before we act – to remember our place in the whole scheme of things – to accept that God is God and we are not – to trust in holy providence.

Humility is something we may describe as a virtue, but our society rarely honours humility as if it was a valuable trait. We learn that we need to be more self-confident to get what we want. We learn that we have to market ourselves if we want to get ahead. We have to be able to name our skills and talents – to be proud of them if we want to get noticed, get promoted, be respected. But walking with God is not a job interview – we don't need to sell ourselves to God or to pretend that God doesn't know it all anyway.

How do we walk with God – walk humbly with God? When it comes to our relationship with our Creator, our lack of humility – our abundance of arrogance – always comes back to our desire to choose our own path without trusting God. As individuals – as a denomination – a nation – we don't want anyone telling us what to do, even if that anyone is God. We want God to bless us – not necessarily to guide us, or direct us.

But if we want God's presence to bless us, we have to be humble enough to allow God to teach us and mould us. With humility, we have much to learn – much to receive – if we can only become humble before God and one another. Walking humbly might mean admitting that we don't know the answers anymore than the next person does when it comes to faithful living. It might mean following God instead of following the crowd.

We are called to love kindness – to show mercy. What is mercy? Mercy means leniency, compassion, forgiveness, kindness, tolerance, charity, benevolence, and generosity. Each synonym has slightly different implications – a different suggestion of what mercy is. Compassion we see in Christ's embrace of people seemingly unlovable. Forgiveness we ask for ourselves and promise to others each time we pray the Lord's Prayer. Charity expresses Christ's command for us toward those who are hungry, thirsty, and empty. It expresses the goal of our missions and ministries as a church. When we think of mercy, do we think of all these things, all of these possible aspects of mercy? When we say *love kindness* do we appreciate the fullness of the Hebrew word *hesed* – mercy – the implications of participating in God's love for the world?

We are to do justice. We are not simply called to believe in justice – to admire and advocate it – we must do it! How do we do justice? Do you know someone, anyone, who is in need? How can you act to meet that need? How can you act to show compassion?

How can you strive to make things equal, fair, level? Do you know anyone who is rejected or oppressed because of their sexuality, race or social status? How can you welcome, include and celebrate them? This is doing justice – legitimizing, acting with integrity, speaking up for the vulnerable, sharing what you have with those who have less. We do justice when we donate to the food or supplies to *Our Place*. We do justice as we work to figure out why we have hungry people in a land of plenty. We do justice when we don't simply avoid being racist but reach out to others, building relationships with Indigenous people and newcomers to our community. We do justice when we move outside our comfort zone in order to share God's love. We do justice as we make decisions and live lives that appear foolish according to the wisdom of the world.

Part of being a person of faith is often about trying to figure out just what God wants from us despite the evidence that what God requires is clear, concise and flows naturally from our relationship with the divine. What do you think that God expects of you – desires from you? Where did you get those ideas?

The gracious generosity of God abounds – we are blessed over and over again in the words of Matthew's gospel. Micah encourages us to hear how we are called to respond to that grace. God desires a radical reorientation of our lives – a fundamental commitment to live in covenant faithfulness – not particular religious observance but the basics of justice, kindness, and humility. Substance over style.

Many people love this passage – perhaps in part because it sounds so simple and clear. It's tempting to simply quote the passage and go merrily on our way. But imagine how challenging it is *to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God*. If we could boil it all down to this – and actually practiced it – what would the world look like?

What are the difficult situations in our families, neighborhoods, cities and towns, our nation and the world, that would be transformed if these were more than beautiful and familiar words? What situations exist in our community of faith or in the life of the broader church that need to be addressed with justice, kindness, and humility? What are the small and large issues of justice that cry out for our attention? How is God still speaking to us through that cry?

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?

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The prophet Micah declared that God calls us to do justice, love kindness and walk with humble hearts. So we offer our gifts humbly, trusting God will use them and us for kind and just purposes in the world God loves.

God of Life, from you all loving kindness, justice and mercy flow. Bless these gifts so that acts of kindness, justice and mercy flow from them, too. And bless our lives so the world may see in us signs of your kingdom at work in the world, in Christ's name. Amen

† Pastoral Prayers and The Lord's Prayer

Gracious God, stir in us the courage to own our true condition as unfinished souls, frail and in need of grace – open to us the door of true blessedness – set our feet on the path of humble obedience, joyful thanksgiving, and transforming love...

Lord, hear our prayer...

Holy God, we thank you that when we are at our lowest, you do not leave us comfortless, but rather near to those who are broken-hearted and close at hand to those who are crushed in Spirit. We thank you that your foolishness is wiser than the wisdom of humankind and your weakness stronger than our strength.

We pray for those who do not know your compassion that they may be drawn to eat and drink of you – and for those who are bound by the chains of fear and despair that they may come to know the truth that sets us free...

Lord, hear our prayer...

We pray, O God, for the well-being of the world around us: we remember those who are sick – those who are vulnerable – those who are alone – those full of darkness – and we ask your blessing upon them....

We think too of our governments and our corporations and of the need for justice and mercy in the affairs of all nations – between all nations...

Lord, hear our prayer...

We rest, ourselves, O God, in you. Bring to life in us the fullness of the gospel and make us ones who pray in Jesus' name as one family... ***Our Father, who art in heaven*** –

hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come – thy will be done – on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen

➤ *Oh for a world where everyone*

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Blessing

May the God of justice strengthen your will to serve.

May the Christ of compassion inspire your heart to love.

May the Holy Spirit walk with you in wisdom this day and always.

➤ *We are marching (repeat)*

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