

Loving Kindness Micah 6:8
A Sermon preached by Stuart Taylor
Elkin Presbyterian Church
November 19, 2017

What does the Lord require of you but do justice love kindness, walk humbly with your God. Last Sunday we began a series on Micah 6:8, with a reflection on doing justice. In that sermon I quoted the great American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr who said, "Love without justice is mere sentimentality". But the opposite is true as well as Niebuhr explains. Justice separated from love can be even worse. If we do not heed Micah's words to love kindness, the struggle for justice can become just one more ideological crusade. Love can be consumed by anger; hope is eaten up in cynicism, meaningful action exhausted in futile busyness. And that is why it is so important that the work of justice remain connected to the tenderness of love. This morning in the second of this series on Micah 6:8 I want to reflect with you on the call to love kindness. Where does Micah's call to love kindness speak to us as individuals, as families, as a community of faith?

American novelist Henry James said, three things are important in life. The first is to be kind; the second is to be kind; the third is to be kind. Abraham Heschel the greatest Jewish theologian in America of the last century once said: "When I was young I admired the intelligent. As I get older I admire the kind". And there is of course William Wordsworth's memorable poem: "the best portion of a good man's life / his little nameless, unremarkable acts of kindness and love". At each and every stage of our lives from the moment we are born till the time we confront that great mystery of our end, we are faced with challenges that remind us that we are fragile creatures of dust. We are radically insecure, in need of one another, in need of expressions of love and understanding and forgiveness. Indeed as human beings we are dependent on expression of tender kindness and loving solidarity for without them our lives would become as a barren desert. The scriptures included in our bulletin provide abundant evidence of the quality of life and love shared within the church of the 1st century. I believe it was the practice of loving kindness that made the early Christian communities so attractive to the first century world and explains why Christianity exploded across the four corners of the known world.

What does the Lord require of you but to love kindness? Have you ever seen that bumper sticker that says, "Practice Random acts of kindness"? Some say that the American writer Anne Herbert scribbled the phrase "Practice random acts of kindness and senseless acts of beauty" on a placemat at a restaurant in 1982. The sentiment has since been popularized through film and literature and has become a part of our cultural vocabulary. The question is "Why?" Why should we show kindness? For those who follow Jesus, the answer is clear: To show the tender mercy and kindness of God. The older I get the more I appreciate kindness in others – that word of thanks, a nod of approval, a smile to a weary worker, a greeting on the street, a hug from a friend. Frederick Buechner writes that "as we move around this world and as we act with kindness, perhaps or with indifference or with hostility toward the people we meet, we are setting the great spider web atremble. The life I touch for good or ill will touch another life, and that in turn

another, until who knows where the trembling stops or in what far place my touch will be felt. Our acts have reverberations, which are felt, way beyond our imagining". Catholic social activist Dorothy Day points out that good deeds are like a pebble cast into a pond: they create ripples that spread in all directions. An ever widening circle of compassion that eventually encompasses the entire creation. In this interconnected world, we live locally knowing that our actions have an impact globally.

What does the Lord require of you but to love kindness? I am struck by the fact that Micah doesn't say love your neighbor nor be kind to the one in need. Micah says to love kindness itself. Kindness blesses us whether we are receiving it or giving it. The Hindu wisdom figure, Ram Dass got it exactly right when he wrote, "Caring for one another, we sometimes glimpse an essential quality of our being. We may be sitting alone; lost in self-doubt or self-pity when the phone rings with a call from a friend who's really depressed. Instinctively we come out of ourselves, just to be there with her and say a few reassuring words. When we're done and a little comfort has been shared, we put down the phone and feel a little more at home with ourselves. We're reminded of who we really are and what we have to offer one another". This spiritual practice of loving-kindness must find its root deep within us. The story is told that Mohandas Gandhi once settled in a village would at once begin serving the needs of the villagers who lived there. A friend inquired if Gandhi's objectives in serving the poor were purely humanitarian. Gandhi replied, "not at all. I am here to serve no one else but myself, to find my own self-realization through the service of these village folk". As Gandhi wisely points out, even as we serve others we are serving ourselves. Wayne Muller writes: "Every act, word, every gesture of genuine compassion nourishes our own hearts as well. It is not a question of who is healed first. When we attend to ourselves with compassion and mercy, more healing is available to others. And when we serve others with an open and generous heart, great healing comes to us".

Loving-Kindness is a spiritual practice at the very heart of things because it is located in everyday life. Each activity of daily life in which we stretch ourselves on behalf of others is a prayer of action- the times when we scrimp and save in order to get the children something special; the times when we share our car with others on a rainy morning; the times when we keep up correspondence with friends or answer one last telephone call when we are dead tired at night. Every day I bear witness to the countless ways that you the people of Elkin Presbyterian Church offer kindness to one another in loving acts of service. I could go on and on about these spontaneous expressions of friendship and caring that I witness among you. What would it mean for us to begin each day with a simple prayer: Lord, what do you want me to do for another today? Lead me. What we need to understand more and more is that this practice of kindness is an expression of prayer. It is a way of being in God that is more direct than all the visions and mystical experiences that we might desire to have.

There are a couple of stories that I want to share with you that illustrate this relationship between kindness and the spiritual life. The first is about the famous mystic St. John of the Cross who alone in his room in profound prayer experienced a rapturous vision of Mary. At the same moment he heard a beggar rattling at his door for alms. He wrenched

himself away from his mystical vision and saw to the beggar's needs. When he returned to prayer the vision reappeared but this time Mary said to him, that at the very moment he heard the door rattle on its hinges, his soul had hung in perilous balance. Had he not gone to the beggar's aid, she could never have appeared to him again. The Benedictine writer, Joan Chittister tells the story of the Rabbi who disappeared on the eve of every Sabbath "to commune with God in the forest", his congregation thought. So one Sabbath night they sent one of their leaders to follow the rabbi into the forest to observe his holy encounters. Deeper and deeper into the woods the rabbi went until he came to the small cottage of an old Gentile woman sick to death and crippled into a painful posture. Once there the rabbi cooked for her and carried her firewood and swept the floor. Then when the chores were finished, he returned immediately to his little house next to the synagogue. Back in the village the people demanded of the one they'd sent to follow him, "did our rabbi go up to heaven as we thought?" "Oh no the witness answered after a thoughtful pause; "our rabbi went much higher than that. "

Loving-Kindness is a spiritual practice at the core of every day life. But it is also the corporate practice that defines the quality of a community of faith like Elkin Presbyterian. Listen to this story that says something very profound about how spiritual renewal will spring forth within a community that practices loving-kindness. Once upon a time there was an abbot, the head of a monastery who was very good friends with the rabbi of a local synagogue. It was Old Europe and the times were hard. The abbot found his community dwindling and the faith life of his monks shallow and lifeless. Life in the monastery was dying. He went to his friend the rabbi and wept. His friend the rabbi comforted him and told him: There is something you need to know, my brother. We have long known in the Jewish community that the Messiah is one of you. What exclaimed the abbot? The Messiah is one of us? How can that be? But the rabbi insisted that it was so, and the abbot went back to his monastery wondering and praying, comforted and excited. Once back in the monastery, walking down the halls and in the courtyard, he would pass by a monk and wonder if he was the Messiah. Sitting in the chapel, praying he would hear a voice and look intently at a face and wonder if he was the one, and he began to treat all of his brothers with respect, with kindness, with awe, with reverence. Soon it became quite noticeable. One of the other brothers came to him and asked him what had happened to him. After some coaxing, he told him what the rabbi had said. Soon the other monk was looking at his brothers differently as he too wondered who among them could be the messiah. The word spread through the monastery quickly, the messiah is one of us. Soon the whole monastery was full of life, reverence, kindness and grace. The prayer life was rich and passionate, devoted. And the psalms and liturgy and services were alive and vibrant. Soon the surrounding villagers were coming to the services and listening and watching intently and there were many who wished to join the community. After they took their vows, these new monks were told the mystery, the truth that their life was based upon, the source of their strength and life together: the messiah is one of us. The monastery grew and expanded into house after house, and all of the monks grew in wisdom, age and grace before the others and the eyes of God. And they say still if you stumble across this place, where there is life and hope and kindness and graciousness, that the secret is the same: the Messiah is one of us. What does the Lord require of you

but to love kindness and when you do, you will know the Risen Lord who is in our midst.
The Messiah is one of us.