



## LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

**Sunday, April 21, 2013**

**Courtney Clayton Jenkins, Guest Lectionary Commentator**

Pastor of Euclid Avenue Congregational Church, United Church of Christ in Cleveland, OH.

**Lection – Micah 6:6-8** (New Revised Standard Version)

- (v. 6) “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?  
(v. 7) Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,  
with tens of thousands of rivers of oil?  
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,  
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”  
(v. 8) 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?

### **I. Description of the Liturgical Moment**

It is no secret that the uniqueness of the African American pastor was born out of the context of slavery. By day, these pastors would humble themselves to work in fields, and by night lead the children of God whose skin had been kissed by nature’s sun. Standing next to their own members by day at the whipping post, they too were beaten and scorned. Yet at night these same pastors would pray over the wounds of a neighbor before attending to their own.

Hence, the pastor within the context of the traditional Black Church has been a central figure of strength and humility amid times of deep injustice. This explains why the celebration, or the appreciation, of pastors within the traditional Black Church context has held great significance to the members and to the pastor. For the pastors who have taken the time to clothe the naked, to feed the hungry, to visit those in prison, to encourage a young child with failing grades, to stand with those who mourn, to appear in court with those who are prosecuted, to counsel those who seek wisdom, and a myriad of other tasks, which have in turn made the lives of others a well of deep riches, all in the name of God, today we pause to say “Thank you.” Today is a day in which we say thank you to God for pointing a shepherd in our direction, while at the same time we say thank you to the shepherd for pointing us in the direction of God.

With the continued rise of the pastor-celebrity, today we honor those who have humbled themselves and committed their lives to the work of “doing justice” and helping the “least of these.”

## **II. Description of the Liturgical Moment**

### **Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter**

I was raised within a United Church of Christ congregation (UCC). We in the UCC, along with other mainline white denominations, have never been good at celebrating the gift of pastoral leadership. Growing up in my black UCC church, I cannot recall ever celebrating the Pastors’ Anniversaries. In fact, I never knew such a thing existed until I joined a church in college. Today, I still serve within the UCC in a predominately black congregation, and they choose not to celebrate my anniversary. In serving this historical congregation I have often been told, “We just don’t do that here.” In truth, this is a painful part of my pastorate. I believe that thanking God for pastoral leadership is of extreme importance.

First, I believe that this is a time when we show God how thankful we are that the congregation has not been left to its own demise. When we thank God for a pastor it means that God does not want us to simply wander in wilderness, but God has given us leaders to assist us in moving towards a future promise.

After we have thanked God, I believe it is important to show appreciation for a surrendered vessel. While a handful of pastors are glorified by the media, many have remained humble, stayed faithful, and maintained a level of integrity which is to be admired. For every late night hospital visit, for every voter rally, every mobilized community effort, and for every shoulder which has been left stained with tears, we ought to take at least one day to say thank you.

### **Part Two: Biblical Commentary**

Micah was one of the 8th century prophets whose message was for both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms. He prophesied during a time of great transition. During the first half of the century, Judah and Israel were prospering. However their situation changed after 746, when Tiglath-pileser III came to power in Assyria.<sup>1</sup> The book of Micah indicates that the lives of ordinary men and women were of great concern during this time of transition. Micah held leaders

responsible for the suffering and poverty of the people because of their efforts for fortification from foreign empires.

Micah emphasizes the need for justice and peace. Like a lawyer in a courtroom, Micah sets out God's case against Israel and Judah, their leaders, and the people. The book of Micah, while short in nature, could easily be divided into three sections:

- I. God's case against Israel and Judah (Micah 1:1-3:12);
- II. Tough times lay ahead but God's people will prevail (Micah 4:1-5:15);
- III. We will move from judgment to hope (Micah 6:1-7:20).

In this final section of the book we see the tension between judgment and hope, but the good news is that hope will prevail. Placed in the context of a courtroom, with the mountains and hills serving as the jury (6:1-2), God offers a summary of the great acts God has performed on behalf of the people (6:3-5). In return, an individual seems to raise a question to the gathered community for those who have sinned and repented, yet desire some action in response to this confession of wrongdoing. The answer is given in Micah 6:6-8.

The response given in verses 6-7 is designed to move from quantitative (e.g. "thousands of rams") to qualitative (e.g. "offer my first born"). However, it is important to note that these offerings are restricted to religious ritual only. The tugging here between quantity and quality poses the question: What can I offer in order to move God to acceptance of my repentance in the context of our religions ceremony? There is an implication of bargaining here when you explore the suggestions that are given. The bargaining is "so extreme that it becomes apparent even to the densest observer that this absurd approach has no limit and establishes neither covenantal relationship with God nor assurance of salvation."<sup>2</sup> Hence the writer suggests that far beyond religious ritual there is a lifestyle that pleases God and draws God closer to us.

A lifestyle of *doing justice* implies that actions speak louder than words. It is not enough to pray for justice or to hope for it. We have far too many who make prayer their justice work. A lifestyle of justice is one that requires action that is concerned with the fair treatment of others, especially those who are viewed as the least and those who are lost. God is a God of the oppressed. By being in relationship with God, we ought to be a people who care about and care for the oppressed. Taking our lead from God, this type of justice requires us to establish a relationship with the oppressed, and to work against the oppressor. It is when we help the oppressed, and cause the actions of oppressors to cease, that our lives begin to line up with what God expects from us.

The word "kindness" here is rather limiting in the English translation. Kindness could be misinterpreted as simply being polite. Rather, the Hebrew indicates that this is a kindness that requires love, loyalty, and faithfulness. It is similar to the way in which God extends a covenant of relationship to us out of love and not obligation. It is not just the way we treat God, or others for that matter, but it is the *spirit* out of which we do this that is being referenced here. This "kindness" is the spirit which lies behind the call to do justice. This loving kindness "is true not false, constant not fickle, reliable not conditional, and discerning. That kind of love springs from a regenerate heart, the same heart that can actualize God's saving actions by memory and faith."<sup>3</sup>

The lifestyle of *doing justice* places its emphasis on the action, while the call to “love kindness” places its emphasis on our attitude for justice.

Several scholars have suggested that the word “humbly” might be better translated as “carefully” or “circumspectly.” When coupled with the verb “walk” this final instruction seems to take on fresh meaning. In other words, the ways in which we walk with God, carefully keeping God at the very center of our lives, is a life that is pleasing to Lord.

These verses indicate that we are called to move far beyond religious ritual and fully examine our own lives. A life that is pleasing to God is one that honors our end of the covenantal relationship we have with God. That commitment is not just to God alone. These same implications of justice, kindness, and humility are to extend to those in our community as well. There is no “one” thing we can do, but rather we can render the very core of who we are to God and find that God is pleased with such an offering.

### **Celebration**

God is less concerned with our religious rituals and more concerned with our lifestyles. Sacrifices in ritual without a spiritual commitment profits nothing. It is the pastor who helps us to grow in our faith, far beyond our religious rituals. It is the pastor who helps us learn how to live a life that is pleasing to God Monday through Saturday and not just Sunday during the worship hour. Pastors who instruct us and strengthen us for mid-week faith, who empower us to do justice in the right spirit, are to be celebrated because these are the lifestyles that are pleasing to God. Happy Anniversary to every pastor. Amen.

### **Descriptive Details**

**Sights:** A believer bowed before God; burnt offerings; one year-old calves; thousands of rams, tens of thousands of rivers of oil; a firstborn child; a person doing justice work; the face of a kind person; the face of a humble believer; modern offerings that God will accept;

**Sounds:** People burning offerings to sacrifice to God; the sounds of a young calf; rivers flowing with oil; a crying child; the sounds of justice (as in people marching, picketing; making signs for rallies; signing petitions); and

**Colors:** The colors of the clothing of a believer bowed before God; a brown calf; the olive color of oil; and the color of a newborn’s skin.

### **III. Other Suggestions for Preachers and Teachers**

#### **Websites:**

- Statistics on Church Attendance and Avoidance. Online location: <http://www.barna.org/congregations-articles/45-new-statistics-on-church-attendance-and-avoidance?q=mid-week>

- Statistics on Clergy. Online location: <http://www.pastorburnout.com/clergy-burnout-statistics.html>

**Quotes:**

- “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” —Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.
- “If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.” —Desmond Tutu
- “There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest.” —Elie Wiesel

**Notes**

1. Simundson, Daniel J. “Micah.” The New Interpreters Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, Vol. VII. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 534.
2. Waltke, Bruce K. “Micah.” The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary. Thomas Edward McComiskey, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academia, 1998), 732.
3. Ibid., 734.