

**Meadowbrook Congregational Church**

**“Life’s Requirements”**

**January 22, 2012**

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***Micah 6; 1-8***

*6Hear what the LORD says:*

*Rise, plead your case before the mountains,  
and let the hills hear your voice.*

*2 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.*

*3 ‘O my people, what have I done to you?  
In what have I wearied you? Answer me!*

*4 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.*

*5 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.’*

*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?*

*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?’*

*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?*

This morning’s sermon topic was purchased by Sharon Brown at Meadowbrook’s church auction last November. I want to thank Sharon for her generosity in bidding on this year’s sermon topic. It is always a mystery and a challenge to work with the suggestions I am provided. I must admit that Sharon was quite kind to me. She said that she was concerned with the question of how do we know we are doing what God wants for us to do. What is the right thing and how can we find it? She said her favorite verse of Scripture was Micah 6:8, a verse that seems to find its way into many people’s hearts. “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?"

Anthony Robinson writes that these words tend to be the John 3:16 of those with a more liberal or progressive faith. He says that just once, he would like to see someone at a professional football game hold up a sign that read, "Micah 6:8".

A few days ago I was speaking to a young person who was frustrated by the reality of opening a checking account. I can't recall the specific banking institution this person was talking about, but we have probably all had a similar experience with the red tape and procedures of our financial institutions. To open an account you need a valid identification, a verifiable address, and a social security number. That all seems to make perfect sense I suppose. Then you need a minimum opening deposit. If that deposit is given by check, the funds in the account are not available until that check clears. After the account is established, a minimum balance must be kept. Each time you go below that minimum balance, there is a service charge. Some banks require a savings account to compliment and provide overdraft protection with your checking account. Some banks have a monthly fee if you have more than a certain amount of teller transactions. Other banks have a fee if you have more than a certain amount of transfers from your savings to your checking. Some banks have a fee if you write more than a certain amount of checks each month. Some banks issue you an ATM card with your account, charging you if you should use that card in another bank's ATM. This is merely some of the stuff required for the privilege of spending your own money.

Requirements are a part of everyday life. At a certain age, you are required to send your children to school. When you do, those children must have immunizations. If you are going to drive a car you must be of a certain age and have a license. If you own property, you are required to pay taxes for the services provided in your community. In this country, we are required to pay our federal income tax by April 15 (I think it is April 17 this year). If we are going to vote in an election we must be registered a minimum number of days before the election. If you want to travel to a foreign country, you must have a passport. If we are going to travel by air, you have to pay a security fee and pass through security procedures at the airport.

Life is full of requirements. They may frustrate us, they may demand more of us than we wish, but they are there.

Toward the end of the eighth century B.C., the prophet Micah emerged on the scene. He was probably the last of the great prophets of that century which included Isaiah, Hosea, and Amos. Each of these prophets prophesied against the abuse of the poor by the merchants who took advantage of the pricing system, by judges who render judgment according to the highest bribe, and priests who offered divine favor for a price. The capitals of surrounding nations had fallen and Jerusalem was left in a weak and perilous state. Micah saw God's judgment upon the nation because of the way the people of God treated others.

Micah was a small town boy sent to preach to those in Jerusalem. He was of the common people, therefore it was perhaps easier for him to discern the corruption and pretension of the big city establishment. He spoke almost as if he were God's attorney, voicing God's complaint against the people, pointing out God's history of faithfulness, and then asking seemingly rhetorical questions that would be asked by God. "What do you think I want from you? When have I ever demanded a burnt offering of calves or rams? When have I asked for rivers of oil? When have I ever demanded the sacrifice of your firstborn on the altar?"

Micah raised what author Abraham Heschel calls, "The most urgent question of religious existence: What is the way of true worship?" In that day, people had answered the question with behavior that included sacrifice, gifts, and bribes before God. They believed God's favor could be purchased or earned without concern for one's behavior or choices. They seemed to think that God wanted quantifiable, measurable stuff. But Micah preached that God's intention could not be lived out among a people caught up with matter of comfort, prosperity, and security.

God said that it is not about stuff, it is about the direction and choices of your life. These are God's requirements for life: do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.

Do justice. Justice concerns the establishment of law but also the concern for equality in all relationships. Justice is a desire for fair play and making certain that all of God's children receive their fair share of God's gifts. In Scripture, when God or Jesus spoke about justice, it was mentioned in support of orphans, widows, the poor, the hungry, the stranger, the weak, and the oppressed. It is living and acting to ensure that those without power and resources have their share of what they need.

Edward Markquart writes of the difference between charity and justice. In the mid-eighteenth century England, many young boys worked in the coal mines away from home. They did so to help support their families who had little or nothing to eat. Their lives were miserable with most of their days spent in cold, dark mine shafts. The churches of that time would offer them presents at Christmas. They also brought turkey and food to their families at holiday time. This was charity. Gradually those in the church started advocating a change in the labor laws. Soon the regulations were changed so those young boys were enabled to attend school instead of moving away to earn money for their impoverished families. Justice was making it illegal to employ young boys as cheap labor to work in the mines.

Love kindness. The word used here for kindness can also be translated as mercy. It is hesed. Mercy. David Leininger writes that hesed is a relationship word. We might say to another, "look at things through my eyes" or "walk for a mile in my shoes." Hesed is the feeling of looking at things with a changed perspective, a way of understanding the world as others might experience it. For the Hebrew people, such mercy was one of the qualities of God. As God deals with each of us in mercy, so God expects us to act in the same way toward others. We are to give when no giving is deserved. We are to act when no action is required. Kindness is celebrating Christ's presence in one another.

Liberty Mutual Insurance has had some television commercials emphasizing the responsibility of everyone to do the right thing. The ads show someone picking up something another person has dropped. A bystander notices what happens and he or she lends opens a door for a stranger. Another bystander notices this action and later reaches out their hand to keep a person from stepping out in front of a car. And so it continues, random acts of kindness leading to more kindness. It is giving without expectation. It is giving by looking at things from another's point of view.

Walk humbly with God. Be attentive to what is really holy. See the world not from your own perspective but from God's view. This is really not a third requirement. It is the way to put into practice the first two requirements of life according to Micah. Being humble, paying attention to what is God's intention means sharing God's desire for justice and kindness. Walking humbly with God makes us realize and live with the understanding that just like our brothers and sisters, we too are sinners in need of God's grace and forgiveness. Walking humbly with God is a call to do more than to come to God with accomplishments and promises to sway God's favor. It is the living of life with God in ways that work out in each and every circumstance.

Os Guinness tells the story of a Belgian official who visited Poland during the days of communist rule. Everywhere she went she was accompanied by a guard from the Polish secret police. Since he was a Catholic, she chose to attend mass one day. The guard went with her. While she was kneeling in prayer, she noticed that the guard's lips were moving, saying the prayers with her. She was surprised and asked him, "Oh, are you a Catholic?" He responded, "I believe but I don't practice." "Then are you really a Communist?" she asked. He said, "I practice but I don't believe."

The words of the prophet Micah are intended to remind us all that God's requirement for God's people is for belief and practice to come together. This is done when we do justice, act with kindness and walk humbly with God. Our hearts and souls should be in concert with our

minds and our actions. Justice and mercy and walking with God are things that we learn as believers and things which transform us spiritually. But justice and mercy and walking with God need to be lived out socially, so that God's intention is shown to all.