

There is hardly a more well-known passage from the Hebrew Bible than this one from the prophet Micah. As we begin February, focusing on Black History in our country, during the 20th-century movement for African-American civil rights, **Micah 6:8 became the epitome of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s work.**

In fact, the passage was so closely associated with Dr. King, that a plaque at a Dallas, TX, transit stop quotes it and attributes the words to him. But just to make it clear, Micah did write the words, or at least they are attributed to him by those who may have collected his oracles into the book now bearing his name.

Most of us would readily recognize Micah 6:8 in some way. And while Micah 6:8 is familiar to us, the beginning verses probably aren't. Micah 6 begins with God confronting Israel with God's faithfulness and their unresponsiveness, questioning why they offer empty rituals when God desires their hearts and a covenant relationship... and then in verse 6, Micah answers for us...

"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?"

Did you know that for a long time in history, there was a commonly held belief that a small vial of oil could bring smoother sailing? Most ancient ships' captains carried vials of oil, hoping never to have to use them, but they clung to the belief that, if needed, the vials would calm the seas.

But for any proverbial truth or shortcut, there are skeptics. Even Ben Franklin, apparently, conducted a series of tests and was convinced there was nothing to it. But others claimed to have seen the effect of a small amount of oil on a large span of water.

There is even a YouTube video of an experiment
with a spoonful of cooking oil
and a small pond rippled by the wind.
The oil does indeed smooth out the ripples for a time.
Maybe the experiments of Franklin and others
used too much or too little oil.
How much oil is enough or too much?

We have known great oil spills in our lifetimes.
From the Exxon Valdez in March 1989
to the millions of gallons spewed into the Gulf in April 2010,
it wasn't smooth sailing for a long time afterward.
In these verses, Micah the prophet is basically asking,
"How much does it take to buy off God?"
To get what I want?
To soothe the troubled waters of our
lives or the lives of those we love?

Thousands of rams, then thousands of rivers of oil?
Of course, we know better.
We know that God isn't bought off by our promises,
by overwhelming devotion,
even by hours of prayer and pew sitting.
We don't earn our stripes by what we do.
We receive grace from the one who,
by his stripes, we are healed.

We know that, but when the waters of our lives are troubled,
we often turn to bargaining.
If I promise to do this, then God, will you do that?
If I offer this offering and up the ante every chance that I get,
will God be so impressed that my desire,
my hope, my desperate plea will be granted by God?

Micah says, "Don't be ridiculous."
You can't impress God.
You can't out-give God.
You can't even come up with an amount
that will pay off the debt you owe.
Ten thousand rivers of oil? A drop in the bucket.
Thousands of rams? Nope.

Micah continues...

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

My child? My flesh?

These were already God's before
you were formed in the womb,
already ransomed, already forgiven.

Actually, God gave up God's only son for our transgressions.

Done and done.

But I want! I want so much.

I want more than I deserve or can imagine.

I want my mom to be healed, for example.

And BTW, thank you for reaching out and for your prayers.

Already done right. Wait, what?

No, when we visited on Friday afternoon,

and to see what was really going on,

and went on Sunday with Hannah and Austin,

she was still broken, lost, and confused

and unable to function as she used to function,

unable to respond as she used to respond,

unable to be the mom I remember.

And yes, she will be fully restored in her eternal life to come,

but that is a bunch of mumbo jumbo

that is pie in the sky in the sweet by and by.

I want you to fix this, God.

Wasn't losing dad early enough?

And yet Micah tell us.

He has told you, O mortal, what is good.

What is good. What I want is good.

It is right; it is fair; this isn't fair. This isn't right.

This isn't good. Not by a long shot.

Listen again, my child.

God has told you what is good.

And what does God require from us?

The word used in the Hebrew

has a weightier meaning in most cases, "seek."

Micah 6:8 seeks from us what

we are being called to do for God.

This contrasts sharply with earlier ideas expressed in Micah 6 that suggest that what God really wants from us are “burnt offerings” consisting of “thousands of rams” and “ten thousand rivers of oil.” Or, upping the ante horribly, it may be that God demands from us the sacrifice of our firstborn children! These human interpretations of God’s will, he says, are wrong, and Micah 6:8 expresses what God actually seeks from us.

Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with God.

A trilogy of living in this world.
Three actions, three poles around which life revolves.
The divergent behaviors that send us scattering around the world, around the community, around the room in my mom’s memory care last week, trying to do justice and make things right. To act justly.

In his 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech, Dr. King **had a dream that his four little children would one day live in a nation where they would not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.**

His dream has certainly not been realized yet, as we are still plagued with racism and discrimination all around us, with the events of this week reminding us of that fact. As we talked about in August and once again yesterday at our Visioning Morning, one of our Tennessee Western Kentucky Conference priorities is Disrupting & Dismantling Racism & Discrimination

We will acknowledge the areas where we need guidance in order to be a voice that speaks up for what is right and against what is wrong.

And this shouldn’t have to be said in 2026, but I want to make sure you know where I stand, and no matter how this particular video happened, this is a good opportunity to remind us of what we believe as United Methodists.

"The United Methodist Church shall confront and seek to eliminate racism, whether in organizations or in individuals, in every facet of its life and in society at large. The United

Methodist Church shall work collaboratively with others to address concerns that threaten the cause of racial justice at all times and in all places."

In January, we renewed our Baptism vows,
and one of those is **Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?**"

When racism shows up —
in thought, in systems, in speech, in action —
it needs to be resisted.

Quietly or publicly, internally and externally,
but resisted in some way.

And the reminder from last week,
every person carries inherent dignity,
and we are all human beings
made in God's image, something sacred.

Anything that denies that dignity
creates places that do damage.

Most of us know those places.

We have all spent time in the world, or of our own world,
where someone has made fun of us or belittled us.

And that there is no scenario,
whether sanctioned or unsanctioned,
in which dehumanizing imagery,
especially imagery with a long
and violent racial history, is acceptable.

It is demeaning and denies the
dignity of people made in God's image.

And that is true whether it be all the way up
from a Republican or Democratic president
in the past, present, or future,
or down to a person sitting in a pew.

It is not funny. It is harmful.

It is not what we do as followers of Christ.

And it is just not kind and then some.

And we are **definitely called to love kindness.**

In a world in which you can be anything, be kind.

With my mom, I wanted to do something
to relieve the pain, something to relieve the hurt.
I wanted an act of mercy that would
fix what is wrong with her.
But there was nothing to do
but to sit and smile and be present.
Pray with her.
Just walking in the door made all the difference for now.
Love kindness, not always to do but sometimes to be.
But the word here really goes beyond
kindness as we define it and means mercy, steadfast,
loyal love, compassionate love for God and each other.

And finally, **Micah tells us the third thing to do is walk humbly with God.**

I want to walk humbly with God,
and I pray you do too.
And I continue to hope and pray that our leaders
at every level will walk humbly with God.
And the word humble here really means
something more like “be ready/willing.”
Something like “walk willingly with your God.”
It might also mean “certainly” or “carefully,”
How is your walk with God? Is careful, certain, willing?

But back to our oil. It turns out that oil, even a little bit,
spreads out thinly over the surface of the water,
and surface tension remains strong enough
to counteract the ripples that would
rise up and become troubled waters.
It becomes like skin holding back the disturbance.

So it works, to a degree, oil on troubled waters.
God came with skin on,
holding back the disturbance.
Incarnation. Emmanuel. God with us.
When I went to see mom, I went to hold back
the disturbance with my skin, for a time, a moment,
at best, so that we could all be reminded that
healing has already happened,
it just is not fully realized yet.
Micah doesn't give us three things to do, but one.

It is all one.
Justice, mercy, and humility aren't separate tasks
but interwoven aspects of a faithful life.
Seeing God in each person and walking
alongside them and with God.
We have a choice about how we move through the world.
We can lead with love and carry the light,
even when it's difficult.
Especially when it's difficult.
We can be a bridge over troubled waters.
To smooth the waters.
And all that is needed is my own skin, your skin.
Skin of every color.
And may our prayer be as well that we all
would be judged by the content of our character
rather than the color of our skin.
We, as believers, are called to embody these
virtues in our communities and in the world,
reflecting God's character.
How will you do justice, seek mercy
and walk humbly with your God this week?