

St. Mark Lutheran Church Service
January 29, 2023
“Heart Walking”
Rev. Stephen P. Greggo, PsyD

Readings

First Reading Micah 6:1-8

“And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:1-8)

Psalm Psalm 15

“Who may live on your holy mountain? Those whose walk is blameless, who do what is righteous, who speak the truth from their hearts. (Ps 15:1b-2)

Second Reading I Cor 1: 18-31

“For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.” (I Cor: 1:25).

Gospel Matthew 5:3-12

“And he began to teach them, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt 5:2-3).

Grace to you, and peace through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Sermon in a Soundbite

This fourth Sunday after the Epiphany could be tagged “Ethics Sunday.” Ethics are moral priorities that guide what we do, say, and think. The Scriptures speak beyond rituals & beneath ceremonies to instruct God’s people how to walk in the everyday world. Our ethical mandate is to live as if the kingdom of heaven is pumping through our veins so that we act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with our God. Those who love the Lord have these moral virtues written on their hearts and this instructs us how to *walk*.

“He has shown all you people what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8).

PRAY

I. Introduction: Heart Walking

The director of the Center for Disease control once identified “walking” to be closest thing we have to a wonder drug for the heart. No prescription is required. The rationale for this audacious claim is that walking *reduces* risk factors that diminish heart health such as elevated cholesterol, high blood pressure, obesity, and diabetes. On the positive contribution side, walking promotes heart strength and endurance. The common tip among health professionals is that walking is the best way to show kindness to your internal life pump. When you hear the phrase ‘heart walking’, the likely association to make is about increasing your steps to promote heart health.

The Scriptures read in our service point to an inverted relationship between our heart and our walk. A blameless walk flows from a heart that loves the Lord. When Jesus is asked about the greatest commandment, he responds with the profound instruction to love the Lord God with all of our heart, all our soul, and all of our mind. The Scriptures tell us that a heart attuned to this moral compass will sustain a God pleasing walk in a hostile world caught in an empty and endless race towards self-fulfillment via the radical pursuit of personal pleasure.

Today the charge will not be to walk more to show love for your heart. Instead, the charge is to show how the love of your heart guides your walk. Jesus instructs us to let love for God rule in our hearts so that our walk pleases the Holy Spirit. A Jesus-filled heart produces a kingdom-honoring walk.

A news story told of a man named Brady, in his prime at 31 years old, freshly discharged from the air force, and in training for a marathon. His heart was in great shape from running and cross-training. During a medical procedure, he suffered a catastrophic stroke that put him into a week-long coma. When Brady awoke, he discovered that he no longer had the ability to talk or walk. After the shock of this tragedy sunk-in, he determined that his battle back was going to be an all-out war. Brady devised a strategy to get his life and mobility back. Gains were made but he can no longer run.

Now a body-builder, Brady shares his victory and strategy for walking with others who face difficult rehabilitation.

- 1) Practice your balance.
- 2) Strengthen your muscles.

- 3) Be prepared to practice even when you are or feel alone.
- 4) Don't look down at your feet; focus your gaze ahead into the distance.
- 5) Be prepared to fall and start over again.

Let's keep Brady's hard learned rehabilitation strategies in mind. The Scriptures challenge disciples to relearn those baby steps of 'heart walking.'

II. Micah's Query: What does the Lord require of you?

Micah is dubbed as a minor prophet. His little book is overshadowed by Hosea and Amos. As a contemporary of Isaiah, he is overpowered by Isaiah's intensity, volume, and messianic declarations. Who needs a little prophet? Maybe we do. The verse at the center of our reflection has been called the greatest and clearest pronouncement of the entire Old Testament. Commentators assert with no apology that Micah 6:8 is the single best summary of the entire book of the law. Given a choice between reading Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, and Numbers, I will gladly take this one verse 'cliff note' any time.

Micah's era was filled with economic expansion and prosperity. Whatever the Syrian equivalent was to the stock market, it was breaking upward records week by week. Syria extended its borders by conquering nations. Jerusalem fell to Assyria. Afterwards, the people of Israel went along for the ride towards material prosperity. Military victories and the spoils of war brought in resources and spawned a selfish materialism, a complacent approach to religion, and the disintegration of personal and social values. Who needs the next world when the current one has so much to offer? Wealth was invested in land acquisitions and this territory was turned into vast growing estates. Age-old sanctions associated with the divine covenant were shrugged off. Social concern was at the bottom of the list of priorities of national and local government officials. Even religious leaders—priests and prophets—jumped on the prosperity bandwagon and enjoyed the benefits of the society who could give them a plentiful livelihood.

Micah's message aims to turn the heart walk of a nation. The problem is that his hearers are satisfied with themselves, saturated with material goods, and living securely under the protection of a powerful pagan ruling authority. Sound familiar? Given these conditions and his warning, Micah has a word for us today. Micah poses one of life's biggest questions: What does the Lord want from us?

- 1) Does the Lord want massive burnt offerings? Would the biggest barbecue ever impress him? No so much.

- 2) Would the Lord appreciate rivers flowing with precious oil? Not particularly.
- 3) Might the Lord of Creation be impressed if we offer our firstborn children? Nope. Human sacrifice is not his thing.

What does our Lord desire?

- 1) **Act justly**: fair and loving treatment of those in your sphere of influence;
- 2) **Love mercy**: devoted faithfulness in our relationships with others; and,
- 3) **Walking humbly**: pacing through life with a reflective and circumspect walk, that displays awareness that we know that God exists, that what he says really matters, and that the Lord actually walk beside us.

III. The Beatitude Expansion

Last week in our Gospel selection, the lectionary recalled Jesus' call of his first disciples. Today, we hear his message about the kingdom of heaven. In similar style and with eloquent potency, the Beatitudes amplify Micah's ethical mandate.

- 1) Act justly. Fair action flows from hearts that hunger and thirst for righteousness. Justice is spread by active peacemakers who are willing to withstand persecution and who press through struggle to achieve shalom and nurture others into holistic living.
- 2) Love Mercy. This heart attitude is natural for those who mourn over their own fallenness, sinful patterns and spiritual bankruptcy. Those who recognize their trespasses and who are prepared to forgive those who trespass against us. Blessed are the generous, the forgiving, the compassionate, and the ones who promote healing for these acts of mercy perpetuate the wonderful cycle of mercy.
- 3) Walk Humbly: The poor in spirit recognize that they are spiritually powerless and their heavenly citizenship must sustain them. The meek avoid aggressive and demanding gestures in life in favor of expressing gentleness. The pure in heart have clear vision for they focus on doing the will of God.

The full set of the eight beatitudes fold neatly into Micah's threefold powerful command to walk out of a heart devoted to live to please God.

IV. Heart Walking: A Rehabilitation Strategy

Remember Brady's five tier strategy to relearn how to walk after a massive setback? Let's bring his framework over into heart walking.

Micah confronted God's people with the stark reality that they had lost their first love. The chosen people were not walking to honor their God. The temptations of this life, the glitter and ease of the culture around them captured their attention, lured them into a lifestyle that allowed their hearts to grow cold. In short, their ability to walk again was seriously compromised. Unlike Brady's tragedy, it did not happen in a flash but gradually over time. Given the dominate voices in our culture that echo via media and social networking, far too many Christians have followed suit. We have lost the ability to heart walk. Here is how to get it back.

- 1) *Practice your balance*, not by searching for fairness for yourself but by promoting justice (balance) for the marginalized people around you. Speak up for benefit of others.
- 2) *Strengthen your muscles*, particularly the mercy muscle by relating to others with grace, kindness, and openness.
- 3) Be prepared to practice humility *even when you feel alone*. In fact, walking humbly is often a lonely walk, that's why fellowship with God's people is so important.
- 4) *Don't look down*. Focus your gaze ahead on the author and finisher of our faith, the Lord Jesus Christ.
- 5) *Be prepared to fall*, confess, reset and start walking again.

V. Application: Heart Walking Exemplified

James Carter was the 39th President of the United States (1977-81). At age 98, he is the longest living ex-President. You may not remember much about his Presidency. Hard times. Over the years, his writing offers insight into his upbringing, political views, and faith walk. Vice President Walter Mondale summarized their time in office by saying "We told the truth, we obeyed the law, we kept the peace." Carter likes to add "We championed human rights."

Before Jimmy Carter entered politics, he was at a turning point in his personal and community life. When his father passed away, then Naval officer Jimmy Carter resigned his post and returned to the family peanut farm. Running a successful business in the South in those years came with certain expectations. He was invited to join the White Citizens' Council. This was not the KKK but an open public fraternity. Carter refused to join. Several close friends and community leaders

respected him but thought him foolish. The peanut farm would fail if Carter did not declare his allegiance to White business leaders and public officials. Several came to see Carter privately and said that they would pay his token fee and speak on his behalf. He would not need to be involved. He would only have to privately sign a membership card. Even with this non-threatening invitation to passively support the council, Carter's heart for justice did not allow him to go along. If he had conceded, he never would have been elected President years later. Act justly.

Pick up any of his memoirs and it is easy to see that Carter exemplifies how to reset one's walk after a setback. Despite his best efforts to fulfill campaign promises, international events and domestic conditions reduced his favorability ratings. He lost his bid for a second term. Carter and his wife had no plan about what to do after this devastating defeat. When they arrived back in Georgia, his business, which had been left in the hands of others, was far in debt and unsalvageable. Carter spent months after arriving home putting a subfloor in his attic so that he had a place to store memorabilia from his time as president.

Most associate Jimmy Carter with the charitable organization Habitat for Humanity. It operates in all 50 states and in over 70 countries to provide affordable housing to those in need. Carter gave tireless work to help build Habitat into a ministry that most Americans (Christian or not) admire and respect. Consider the many volunteers who have served on Habitat projects. This is love of mercy.

The Carter Center was started a couple years after presidency as a not for profit dedicated to wage peace via mediation and to reduce disease by launching sustainable disease prevention programs in the poverty-stricken zones. These selfless efforts to make peace and restore shalom, make Jimmy Carter an exemplar of one who serves others in the name of the Lord. In these projects, he did the work of a sitting president in terms of international affairs but without the office. This is walking humbly.

At almost 100, Jimmy Carter speaks about death and living life. He still preaches at his Church. When the media carry the news of his homegoing, remember the charge of this Ethics' message today: act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly before the Lord. In the meantime, take these rehabilitation steps seriously. Relearn to heart walk by letting love for God rule in our hearts so that your walk pleases the Holy Spirit. A Jesus-focused heart produces a kingdom-honoring walk.