

“What is God’s Will?”

When I was beginning my preparations for my remarks this morning, the first thing I noticed was this line from our Collect for the Day:

Almighty and everlasting God, *you govern all things both in heaven and on earth...*

And the thought that immediately came to my mind was this:

“God, I can’t really comment on how well you’re governing things in heaven, but it doesn’t look like you’re doing a very good job here on earth.”

And after a few moments of (admittedly) self-satisfied reflection, another thought then occurred to me,

“Oh, right, God’s governance over the earth is mediated through all of us humans. Apparently it is *we* who are falling down on the job.”

And that thought wasn’t quite so self-satisfying, but it pointed me in the direction I needed to go, because it was a perfect segue into our reading from Micah.

The Old Testament book of the prophet Micah is only seven chapters long, and could be read in one sitting. But what it lacks in length it more than makes up for in the depth of Micah’s understanding of the human situation, and of what God hopes *for* us, and expects *of* us. So, it can be a real goldmine of insight and information, and it’s for that reason that I’d like to take a closer look at our reading from Micah.

Right now, I’d like you to turn in your worship booklets to page [2/4] and find the reading from Micah. The first thing I want you to notice is that, at the beginning of each paragraph, I have inserted in brackets the identity of the speaker of that paragraph. That’s going to help us keep track of what’s going on.

In the first paragraph, the speaker is Micah, who explains that God has a complaint against the people of Israel. Our reading doesn't explain the nature of that complaint, but if we were to refer back to the earlier chapters of Micah, we would learn a few things. Apparently, this is the problem:

The wealthy of Israel take advantage of the poor of Israel;

The powerful people of Israel take advantage of the powerless people of Israel;

However, these wealthy and powerful people are nevertheless claiming that they are the faithful followers of God — that they attend worship regularly, they say all the right prayers, and they offer all the right sacrifices. But for all that, they have no ethical or moral foundation for their lives. In other words, they're "all show but no go."

That's the complaint God has against the people of Israel.

In the second paragraph, the speaker is God, who is trying to understand what went wrong in his relationship with his people. And almost as if God is thinking aloud, there is this very brief overview of what God has done for his people:

God delivered them from slavery in Egypt;

God gave them good and faithful leaders like, Moses, Aaron, and Miriam;

God blessed them, repeatedly, *and even through foreigners* like Balaam;

and — and this is the *coup de gras* — God brought them into the promised land.

All of these things God has done for his people. And how have the people repaid God? Essentially, and eventually, by becoming the very sort of *evil* people that God had delivered them from. In other words,

People who were once slaves have become (in essence) slave owners themselves.

People who were once taken advantage of, are now taking advantage of others.

And people who were once marginalized, are now marginalizing others.

So that's the second paragraph.

In the third paragraph, the speaker now becomes the people of Israel. And the question they ask at the beginning — “With what shall I come before the Lord?” — is essentially an admission of guilt. There is no attempt to counter God's claims. They don't try to proffer any “alternative facts.” Rather, what they do is turn to a familiar formula: that is, if God is unhappy with us, maybe we should just offer him another sacrifice. Maybe that will patch things up with God?

But therein lies the problem. Because these are people who think the problem is with God, and not than with anything they've done, or left undone. In some ways, they're very much like the athlete who blames his equipment for his poor performance. It never seems to occur to the people of Israel that the change that needs to take place is *within themselves*, and in their own behavior.

And this takes us to the fourth and final paragraph, where the speaker is, once again, Micah. And Micah is not going to let these people off the hook. There will be no more business-as-usual in the way they live out their faith, or in the way they conduct their lives. Even though the people of Israel have upped the sacrificial ante — offering “thousands of rams” and “tens of thousands of rivers of oil,” and even their firstborn children — Micah (*and* God) isn't buying what they're selling. No longer can they just “write a check” to fix their problems.

Rather, Micah explains the situation: God has already told you what he expects of you; through all of his laws and commandments, God has made it abundantly clear what he wants from his people. And this is what Micah says:

“What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

That is such a lovely statement! And that's part of its problem, because while we may be quick to print it on plaques and display it on bumper stickers, we may not

be quite so quick to do the work it takes to understand what it's telling us to do. So, that's what we're going to do right now.

First, doing "justice" (Hebrew: *mishpat*) doesn't merely mean being fair, or rewarding good and punishing evil. Rather, it has the broader meaning of *insuring that everyone has everything they need*. And I think that would necessarily include things like access to a job, housing, food, education, and health-care. And lately, it seems that this list should be expanded to include things like sanctuary, security, and refuge. This is God's vision for the society of his people, and ensuring these things is what it means to "do justice."

Second, to "love kindness" (Hebrew: *hesed*) is a statement that references that unbreakable connection between God and each of his people. And since God wants all of his people to have everything they need, *and* since (as I mentioned earlier) God's will for an individual is fulfilled through the other people around that individual, then *it's up to us* to make sure God's will takes place, and people have what they need.

And, third, to "walk humbly (Hebrew: *tsana*) with your God" is simply telling us that we need to pay attention to where God leads us in his search for "justice" (*mishpat*) for all his people. Because, quite frankly, we may not always be aware of the needs of certain groups of people. But God is.

Now if all this seems like a lot to take in, we're in luck because the psalm appointed for today gives a pretty good description of the sort of persons we've been called by God to be. Now we may not have been paying especially close attention to it while we were [reciting/chanting] it, so I'd like us all to turn back to page [3/5] in our worship booklets, find that psalm, and I'd like for us to recite it in unison. But this time, pay close attention to what it's saying.

1. Lord, who may dwell in your tabernacle? Who may abide upon your holy hill?
2. Whoever leads a blameless life and does what is right, who speaks the truth from his heart.
3. There is no guile upon his tongue; he does no evil to his friend; he does not heap contempt upon his neighbor.

4. In his sight the wicked is rejected, but he honors those who fear the Lord.

5. He has sworn to do no wrong, and does not take back his word.

6. He does not give his money in hope of gain, nor does he take a bribe against the innocent.

7. Whoever does these things, shall never be overthrown.

Or, in other words, he does “justice,” and she loves “kindness,” and they walk humbly with God.

Let us pray: God our deliverer, you walk with the meek and the poor, the compassionate and those who mourn, and you call us to walk humbly with you. When we are foolish, be our wisdom; when we are weak, be our strength; that, as we learn to do justice and to love mercy, your rule may come to us as a blessing.

Amen.