

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
Micah 6:1-8

September 25, 2005
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Micah 6:1-8

- ¹ Listen to what the LORD says:
"Stand up, plead your case before the mountains;
let the hills hear what you have to say.
- ² Hear, O mountains, the LORD's accusation;
listen, you everlasting foundations of the earth.
For the LORD has a case against his people;
he is lodging a charge against Israel.
- ³ "My people, what have I done to you?
How have I burdened you? Answer me.
- ⁴ I brought you up out of Egypt
and redeemed you from the land of slavery.
I sent Moses to lead you,
also Aaron and Miriam.
- ⁵ My people, remember
what Balak king of Moab counseled
and what Balaam son of Beor answered.
Remember your journey from Shittim to Gilgal,
that you may know the righteous acts of the LORD."
- ⁶ With what shall I come before the LORD
and bow down before the exalted God?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?
- ⁷ Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousand rivers of oil?
Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?
- ⁸ He has showed you, O man, 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.

Last week I assured you that the guest list for the Kingdom of Heaven includes your name. And the Gospel tells us that our names didn't get on the list because we were good, or we did well, or we worked hard, or because we were better than someone else. Rather, our names are on the list by virtue of God's grace—that's it. There's nothing we can do to earn our way into God's eternal embrace, there isn't some kind of "Stairway to Heaven" that we climb by doing the "right" things on earth.

Now having said this, I must note that there is some disagreement in religious circles regarding just how free God's grace is. Well, describing it as "some disagreement" is a bit of an understatement. Actually, this controversy over the meaning and nature of God's grace has been

the subject of great consternation and division over centuries. It was a core issue behind the Protestant reformation. For years folks have asked the questions . . . Is grace for everyone, even the folks who don't ask for it? Is it for people who have really screwed up and sinned abundantly but have not asked for God's forgiveness? Is it only for the poor and pitiful and pathetic, like a reading of the Beatitudes or Jesus' teaching that it is harder for a rich person to enter heaven than it is for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, might lead us to believe? Is it only for the folks who went to church and gave big bucks to the stewardship campaign and served on committees? I don't really know the answers to these age-old questions. But, my heart tells me that God's grace is available for us all, but there's no way to know the answer to that question in the here and now because we'll only know the truth about that one in the by and by. But for now, let's live with the belief that God's grace is for everybody—including us. If for no other reason than it's a lot better living in a state of grace than it is a state of guilt.

If we move forward on that premise, we're faced with a question—If God's grace is for all, what's the point of trying to live a good life? Why knock ourselves out? If we've got a free-ride, why would we pay the price of tuition? What's the point of being a person of faith if it doesn't get us ahead in this life or the next? To address our questions, let's turn to Martin Luther, the so-called father of the Protestant Reformation. He wrote . . .

Faith is not what some people think it is. Their human dream is a delusion. Because they observe that faith is not followed by good works or a better life, they fall into error, even though they speak and hear much about faith. "Faith is not enough," they say, "You must do good works, you must be pious to be saved." They think that, when you hear the gospel, you start working, creating by your own strength a thankful heart which says, "I believe." . . . Instead, faith is God's work in us, that changes us and gives new birth from God. (John 1:13). It . . . makes us completely different people. It changes our hearts, our spirits, our thoughts . . . it is a living, creative, active and powerful thing, this faith. Faith cannot help doing good works constantly. It doesn't stop to ask if good works ought to be done, but before anyone asks, it already has done them and continues to do them without ceasing.

Faith is a living, bold trust in God's grace, so certain of God's favor that it would risk death a thousand times trusting in it. Such confidence and knowledge of God's grace makes you happy, joyful and bold in your relationship to God and all creatures. The Holy Spirit makes this happen through faith. Because of it, you freely, willingly and joyfully do good to everyone, serve everyone, suffer all kinds of things, love and praise the God who has shown you such grace. Thus, it is just as impossible to separate faith and works as it is to separate heat and light from fire!

And if you think about your own lives, I reckon you'll come up with conclusions similar to Luther's. After all, when you made your donation to help with Hurricane Katrina relief, did you do it with the thought that if you gave enough, it might just make God like you a little bit more?

Did you think, “As a person of faith I am going to give money to help.” No. You did it because you couldn’t imagine not helping. When you signed up to do the CROP walk, did you do it thinking that by helping to feed hungry people, you were earning a spot in heaven? Did you say to yourself, “If I’m a good Christian I’ll take this walk?” No. You did it because you know that there are hungry people who need food. It’s like Luther said, “Because of [faith], you freely, willingly and joyfully do good to everyone, serve everyone, suffer all kinds of things, love and praise the God who has shown you such grace.”

And so, one answer to the question, “Why bother being good if I’m going to heaven anyway?” is that—as a person of faith, you can’t really not do good. You’re just hard wired to help. You jump in to assist without giving it a second thought. Your faith and your actions are so inextricably linked that you can’t separate them—just as you can’t separate heat and light from fire.

And so be it—as a person of faith you can’t help but to do good. I agree with that statement, but not fully. Though we are people of faith, we are still people with the ability to choose. We are people who are tempted—by money, power, wealth. We are often confronted with the choice to do what feels good or is convenient in the here and now though it laughs in the face of what might be best for us, others, and the environment in the future. It’s not so simple as—loving Jesus makes us always do the right thing. It would be nice if that were the case, but that has not been my experience.

But, because we do have this ability to choose right and resist wrong—we are faced with a different answer to the question—why do good if we’re all saved anyway? And my answer to that question is that we do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God because it’s about the only way we have of saying thanks to God. Our lives are our thank you note to God. Recognizing our lives as a gift from God brings to question the idea of reciprocity. And if you’re talking about reciprocating to God—well then you definitely have the issue of “What do you get the person who has everything” on your hands. Sometimes, the only feasible response to a gift of mammoth proportions—a gift such a life itself—is a thank you. There’s no way we’ll ever be able to reciprocate so all we can do is be grateful. Our lives as we live them on earth are the thank you notes we give God in response to the gratitude we feel for life itself. Do you get to keep the gift even if you don’t write a thank-you note? Yes, much like we all have God’s grace whether we’ve earned it or not. Do you feel a lot better about the gift every time you use it if you know you properly thanked the person who gave it to you? Of course, just like we all feel a lot better about ourselves and our relationship with God when we strive to live lives in which we do as we were told and do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.

Corey often talks about a poster that hung on his wall as a child. It read “What you are is God’s gift to you, what you become is your gift to God.” And what you become, what you give, how you live are not only a gift to God but also your thank you note to God—a thank you that you write each day. Every time you write a check to the church or some other charity, you’re writing a thank you to God. Every time you volunteer in the Food Pantry or hospital or what have you, you’re writing a thank you note to God. Every time you stand up in the face of what is wrong and seek justice for another, you’re writing a thank you note to God. Every step you take in the CROP walk or every dollar you gave to someone who is walking—everyone is a thank you to

God. Indeed, every time you walk through the doors of this church, you're writing that thank you note to God—not because you have to but because you want to. You could have stayed home, you could have played golf, you could have gone sailing, you could have done so many other things—but you didn't. You came here. And that makes a difference—not in terms of whether or not your gonna make it to heaven—but it terms of how you live your life and in terms of what you've written in your thank you note to God.

Stacey Herman, one of our office administrators, recently sent a note to an old friend who she heard was having cancer surgery. She doesn't know the woman very well anymore and so she thought it most appropriate to just send a short "Thinking of You" note. Upon receiving Stacey's note, the woman sat down and wrote Stacey a thank you note because Stacey's "thinking of you" note meant so much to her in the midst of a challenging time. Stacey came into the office the next day, just floored by receiving a thank you note for what she considered to be a relatively simple gesture on her part. Stacey has spoken of that thank you note a number of times. It clearly means a lot to her to have her seemingly small token of care be so well-appreciated.

And why would it be any different with God? Surely God appreciates a little appreciation as well. And the ways in which we live our lives, the choices we make, the folks we help, that's how we show God our gratitude and appreciation. That's how we say thank you to God—with our very lives themselves. And that's why we bother to try do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God—we do it for God's sake, as a way to say thank you and sign the note with all our love.