

What God Requires

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, October 28, 2018, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [Micah 6:1-8](#) and [Luke 11:37-44](#)

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One evening, years ago, when I lived on the edge of King County, Washington, I drove into Seattle to meet up with some friends to see a movie. I stopped in a pizza shop to grab something to eat before the movie. The pizza shop had a red, tiled floor, which (given Seattle's propensity to drizzle) was damp. As I stood in line, my foot slid out from underneath me and I quickly got up close and personal with that red tile. I lay there, immediately feeling like a klutz. Almost as quickly, someone spoke up.

Now, there are three things I would have expected to hear from a bystander. I would have expected a bystander to point at me and laugh; or I would have expected a bystander to ask if I was okay; or I would have expected a bystander to offer a hand to help me up. None of those what the immediate response. What I heard, almost as quickly as I fell, were two words: "Sue 'em."

When I dropped a 45-pound weight on my big toe at the gym something like nine years ago, the staff was relatively compassionate when I hobbled over to the staff area. They were very quick to get me some requested ice. And the club manager tried to act nonchalant as he sat with me and inquired as to what happened. But I could tell that underneath his questions, he was preparing a defense for a possible lawsuit – one that I had no intention of filing.

It seems to me that American culture is sue-happy. It is a pity, perhaps even a shame (as in, "we should be ashamed"), that we so quickly move our disputes to the courthouse, rather than working them out with each other. One might think that, given our cultural propensity to move to the courthouse, we would immediately notice that Micah 6:1-8 is a lawsuit. Perhaps it's the power of verse 8 that draws our attention away from the details of verses 1-7, but I don't want to gloss over them.

The scene opens with God as bailiff, calling the parties in the lawsuit to the court and to plead their case.

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

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."

Then God switches roles and makes a case in the most peculiar way. One might expect God to lay out the charges, to explain that the "controversy with his people" is. There is a broken relationship between God and Israel and the community within Israel itself is broken. But God doesn't blast Israel. God doesn't say, "You, O Israel, have broken

covenant with me! You, O Israel, are not caring for your people!" Instead, God asks, "Where did I go wrong?"

"O my people, what have I done to you?

In what have I wearied you? Answer me!

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...."

That is not a prosecution strategy you're going to see on "Law & Order."

I wonder how it would work in the case *Juliana v. U.S.* If you're not familiar with this case, let me tell you about it. In 2015, 21 youth sued the federal government (including then-President Barack Obama) in the U.S. District Court for the District of Oregon. Their complaint claims that, through the government's "actions that cause climate change, it has violated the youngest generation's constitutional rights to life, liberty, and property, as well as failed to protect essential public trust resources."¹ In other words, this group of youth are suing the government for allowing and even encouraging climate change to happen.

The case has been dragging through the courts. The government has tried repeatedly to get the case dismissed. Lower courts have repeatedly denied this motion. That denial has been appealed. A trial date was set for tomorrow, October 29, but it has been delayed by yet another motion to the Supreme Court. It is not clear when, or even if, the Supreme Court will allow the case to go forward. Nonetheless, demonstrations have been planned for today and tomorrow across the country, including one tomorrow, 3:00-6:00, outside the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco.² (Yes, I'm inviting you to attend.)

Assuming the Supreme Court allows this case to go to trial, can you imagine the youth standing up in the court and turning to the government's lawyers and saying, "Where did we go wrong? What did we do that you would destroy our future? How have we offended you that you would allow the environment to be destroyed?" I don't know how effective a legal strategy that would be, but it is what these youth are saying on behalf of all youth and all future generations. What have we done that you should destroy our future?

It may be an ineffective legal strategy for the American federal courts, yet it is essentially God's legal strategy in the case of Micah 6:1-8. "I have repeatedly saved you, first by bringing you out of slavery in Egypt. And yet I've offended you? Yet somehow you're wearied of me? Let me what I've done to you."

Israel, through the mouth of Micah, seems to have convicted themselves in response to God's pleading. They seem to say, "We're guilty," with their response, which comes as a series of questions:

¹ Our Children's Trust, <https://www.ourchildrenstrust.org/us/federal-lawsuit> (accessed 27 October 2018).

² Learn more at <https://www.facebook.com/events/1689974634457709/>

"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?"

Notice how the response keeps getting bigger, more demanding, more costly. Yes, God is God, and we should come before God, we should bow before God in recognition of that fact. We should offer our contrition for having turned our backs on God and each other. But what do we bring? What would satisfy God for our sinfulness? Should we offer sacrifices? Should we come with thousands of ram and rivers of oil? What is an appropriate sacrifice?

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

And then Micah responds:

"God 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?"

Yesterday morning, a white man walked into a synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and killed 11 people. These are their names. Micah's prophetic word from thousands of years ago resonates today.

Rev. William Barber, II, said, speaking of this horrific act, "I'm reminded of what Dr. King said after four little girls were murdered in an Alabama church: 'we must be concerned not merely about who murdered them, but about the system, the way of life, the philosophy which produced the murderer.'"³ The system, the way of life, the philosophy at work that produces murderers like this one, need to be named and challenged. These are transgressions that we as a society have committed and ten thousand rivers of oil will not make up for this.

Joyce Feinberg, 75
Richard Gottfried, 65
Rose Mallinger, 97
Jerry Rabinowitz, 66
Cecil Rosenthal, 59
David Rosenthal, 54
Bernice Simon, 84
Sylvan Simon, 86
Daniel Stein, 71
Melvin Wax, 88
Irving Younger, 69

May their memory be a blessing

WORLD
CONGRESS

³ The Rev. Dr. William Barber, II, quoted on the California Poor People's Campaign Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/californiappc/posts/358047208266413> (posted and accessed 28 October 2018).

Micah is right. There is only one way to address this, and that is to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

All this month, we've been inviting each other to think about our financial giving to the church during the next year. The primary question has been, "What shall we bring?" We've talked about the importance of bringing our "yes" to God. We've talked about the importance of bringing our stories to the community. We've talked about the importance of bringing our gifts – our skills, our time, and our money – to support the church's ministry.

Today we bring our financial pledges. From a practical point of view, we do this to help the leadership of the church build a budget for next year. From a spiritual point of view, we do this to encourage ourselves to look at our stewardship. And not just at our stewardship of our money. As this scripture points out, God doesn't want our calves and our rams and our rivers of oil.

God wants our whole lives.

You see, "a life of relationship with God inevitably results in constant and intentional (not [simply] random) acts of justice and love of mercy. Acting justly means actively working to rectify that which favors some and crushes others. Loving mercy includes giving one's self as offering over and over. Loving mercy means offering generosity and forgiveness, out of a love that transcends our prejudice, because God has, does, and will continue to do the same for us. A humble walk with God implies that we recognize justice and mercy aren't dependent on our standards or abilities. Humility keeps our egos in check so that we don't think of ourselves as 'magnanimous vigilantes' but rather as humble followers responding to the call from" God.⁴

Amen.

Questions for contemplation

In addition to your financial pledge today, how could it look like to pledge

- to be more deeply involved in bringing justice to our land?
- to more consistently doing acts of loving kindness and mercy?
- to walk more humbly with God?

⁴ Daphne Gascot Aries, "What Shall We Bring? Micah 1:35, 5:2-51, 6:6-8," an essay written as part of the stewardship materials we have been using this season.