



# *Lakeside Sermons*

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
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JULY 16, 2017

Some Assembly Required  
Matthew 22:34-40; Micah 6:6-8

It has been a time of unrest and uncertainty. There's been political upheaval and infighting, questions about incompetency and corruption in government, and threats from a hostile foreign power. The rich are getting richer on the backs of the poor through dishonest business practices, the poor are struggling to meet basic needs, and more and more people with power and privilege don't seem to notice or care. It is a time of threats and fear, from outside and within, and many people of faith, rather than responding to these needs with courage and compassion, are retreating to the safety of religious ritual and judgmental piety.

Now, before you get upset about my political commentary, I'm not talking about our current situation in this country. Well, not entirely. I am actually describing King Ahaz, the city of Jerusalem, and the nation of Judah which was being threatened by advancing Assyrian armies nearly 3,000 years ago. But it does occur to me that not much has changed. The division and unrest, corruption and threats, and the retreat to some misguided standard of religious purity in the face of so much fear and uncertainty, which characterized this part of Judah's past, have been all-too familiar throughout human history and indeed continue up to the present. We don't seem to be adept at learning from the mistakes of our ancestors, but does that mean we are destined to repeat them?

Out of the muck and mire of Jerusalem's societal upheaval and religious corruption, we hear the clear voice of Micah's prophecy calling the people, not to a purified sectarian faith which excludes the vulnerable and those with whom we disagree, but to the path of life and hope which God had paved through the wilderness to bring his people out of slavery and into the Promised Land: "The voice of the Lord cries to the city, and it is sound wisdom to fear your name," Micah calls. "Hear, O tribe and assembly of the city! Can I forget the treasures of wickedness in the house of the wicked, and the scant measure that is accursed? Can I tolerate wicked scales and a bag of dishonest weights? Your wealthy are full of violence; your inhabitants speak lies, with tongues of deceit in their mouths. (Micah 6:9-12)

Micah's words may have been to the leaders and the privileged in Jerusalem in the 8th century B.C., but my goodness, they do hit close to home, don't they?

With a startling and profound clarity, Micah reminds the Hebrew people, and he tells us of the building blocks required to construct a life pleasing to God, not just for some legends of the faith in some Golden Age past, but for all people in all times: "He 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?" (Micah 6:8)

I want to say, "Really, God? Is that all? With all the perplexing and troubling events swirling around us, isn't there something more that we need to do? Don't we need some elaborate rituals or incantations? Don't you have a long list of rules and laws for us to follow? Maybe we should come up with guidelines so we can be sure of who's in and who's out, so we can keep "those people" from corrupting our rituals and polluting our doctrine. Surely, God, our faith needs more defined lines of black and white because there is already too much gray in the world."

And to each of these questions, to each of our protests for rigid rules and clear lines, Micah's voice resounds with the simple but never-easy call, not even in a declarative sentence, but in the form of a question to us: "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Justice, kindness, and humility. These components for the life of faith are not all that complicated, but we all know that assembling them properly in our lives requires attention and effort and continual commitment.

About 800 years later, the Gospel writers record that in another time of political and social unrest, when religious leaders were once again protecting their power and authority by demanding ritual purity and rigid interpretations of sacred law, Jesus spoke another word of clarity about what is most important in the heart of God, another word that is simple but is anything but easy—that is for his people to love God with their whole selves and to love their neighbors as themselves. From this central premise of life and faith, Jesus said, all of the law and prophets are rightly understood. Again, the instruction to love is not so difficult to comprehend, but because we have so much trouble getting ourselves out of the way, assembling a life on the foundation of selfless love proves to be a daunting task.

Twenty-six years ago, Lakeside folk responded to Micah's question and to Jesus' instruction by rolling up their sleeves, picking up their hammers and

paint brushes, and heading out to repair homes for the vulnerable and neglected in this community, and as others came alongside to join in the work, Gatekeepers Workcamp was born. Like the words of the prophet and of Christ, Gatekeepers is simple, but there is nothing easy about it.

Year in and year out, I marvel at the dedication, the ingenuity, the determination, and the passion that hundreds of Christ followers in this community have for the ministry we call Gatekeepers. To give so generously of time, skill, money, and physical effort to lead youth and repair the homes of strangers is no small thing indeed. For this congregation to give vision to a ministry like Gatekeepers and for individuals of such a variety of backgrounds and denominations to believe in its mission enough to contribute their own sweat and worry and energy and resources for over two decades is surely a sign that God's Spirit is at work through us and that ministries like Gatekeepers are a part of fulfilling God's requirements for building a life that is pleasing to God.

Throughout this past week's devotions, we considered each of the requirements to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God, examining how each of these building blocks for the life of faith is a part of the Gatekeepers ministry and how God's call to justice, kindness, and humility is often different from the way the world understands them.

The justice of which Micah speaks, for example, is not one that seeks vengeance or demands retribution. It is a justice which recognizes that all people are created in God's image, persons of worth to be loved and treated with respect. This justice does not hate because of skin color, ignore because of economic or educational disparity, or condemn because of political philosophy. Neither does it limit because of gender, patronize because of age, mock because of sexuality, or judge because of religion. It demands dignity and an equal chance and a fair shot for everyone. It is a justice which realizes we are all on equal footing before God, each and all searching for hope and love, each and all desperately in need of grace.

Justice may seem challenging for us because, though we know we are supposed to stand for it and to be a part of working to achieve it, injustice may seem at times to be larger than any of us, something that is systemic and institutionalized, so we can let ourselves off the hook too easily, convincing ourselves that achieving justice in any real sense is beyond our reach or control.

So Micah speaks to us a bit more directly when he says that we are also called to act kindly. While justice may be about larger issues of equality and forces that we can influence but may not ultimately be able to change,

kindness taps us on the shoulder to remind us that how we treat people in our everyday encounters is also of concern to God. Kindness is perhaps even more demanding because it is even more personal. It challenges us to watch how we speak and respond to our classmates and coworkers, to the cashier at the store, and to the people with whom we live. It gives without expecting anything in return, encourages freely and criticizes sparingly, and looks beyond itself to pay attention to the needs of others. Sometimes this kindness even packs up its tools, crosses the railroad tracks, works itself to the point of exhaustion, and then gets up to do it all again tomorrow, all for the sake of a neighbor whose roof is leaking or whose porch is caving in, who hasn't had a working shower or bathroom sink in years, or whose home is covered with overgrown shrubs and peeling paint and rotting wood. The kindness we are called to extend is not selective or stingy but instead responds to others with the same abundant generosity which God offers to us.

And just when we start feeling mighty proud of ourselves for how kind we are to those around us, Micah whispers in our ear a word of caution about becoming too sure of our own righteousness. If kindness is personal, then this humility to which Micah calls us knows us intimately, challenging us to be honest about our gifts and our flaws, recognizing that we are both wretched sinner and beloved child of God. This humility finds confidence in being a valued part of the human family and meekness in knowing we are no more or less precious than every other brother or sister we encounter. It means that we do not think of ourselves more highly than we ought or less of others because they are different from us. It sees that those who are better off than we are not necessarily the role models we should emulate and that those who are worse off are not necessarily so because they are lazy or incompetent. This humility realizes that all we have and all we have achieved are gifts from God and that we are one accident or illness, one poor choice or tough break, or one circumstance of chance beyond our control from losing so much of what we value and what we pat ourselves on the back for acquiring. And this humility does not just reach down to pull others up to our level or throw out a lifeline from the safety of the shore. No, this humility sweats and frets, gets its hands dirty, and makes its heart vulnerable because it recognizes that we are all the same distance away from God and we are all in this boat together.

During Friday morning's group devotion, Pastor Richard Joyner, who is well known to many of us, reminded us that the work we accomplished this week is only the beginning because, as followers of Christ, we are called to keep the spirit of Gatekeepers alive in our life and work every day. And he reminded us that the spirit of Gatekeepers embodies Micah's call to justice,

kindness, and humility as we love the least among us with the greatest love that has been offered to the world through Jesus Christ.

This spirit of Gatekeepers is in the pride on the face of the 12-year-old who hammered her first nail, and in the patience of the 60-year-old who taught her how to do it. It is in the selflessness of a college student who spent his week on a roof in the 100-degree heat so that an 80-year-old man will be safe and dry in his home. The spirit of Gatekeepers is in sensitivity shown with an elderly homeowner who is reluctant to purge his home of tattered clothes and expired food, even though they have overrun his house with clutter. It is in the attention of a middle schooler listening to and learning from the life story of someone who has felt forgotten and neglected by her community. It is pastors and deacons, teachers and nurses, executives and stay-at-home moms putting on work clothes and clothing themselves in love for a week of grueling yet rewarding work. It is making sandwiches and delivering supplies and contributing in countless other ways to the work that was accomplished this week.

And the spirit of Gatekeepers is also in advocating for decent housing, quality education, and affordable healthcare throughout our community; in delivering meals, tutoring children, and mentoring young people; and in giving generously to ministries which serve the poor. The spirit of Gatekeepers is including someone who has been excluded, extending mercy to those who have made poor choices, comforting one who is grieving, sitting with those who are lonely, and welcoming those whom others have rejected. The spirit of Gatekeepers is, like Micah's call to justice, kindness, and humility, simple but never easy. It may send us where we are not comfortable going. It may call us to tasks that are difficult and to people who do not respond as we think they should. It may call us to examine our attitudes and assumptions about others who are different from us in every way and to extend the love of Christ to those the world tells us we should despise. The instructions seem simple, but assembling the building blocks for a life that is pleasing to God is never easy. But thanks be to God, we have the promise that we will not labor alone, that the Spirit of God will empower and sustain us, and, as with the homes we worked to restore this week, that the transformation will be astounding! Thanks be to God indeed! Amen.

July 16, 2017

## Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

On a gloriously beautiful summer's day, when flowers of every color and stripe lift their faces to the sky and birds sing their songs of friendship and delight, we, too, lift our hearts and voices in praise, O God. While everything is not right with the world, we are grateful to be here and happy to be able to offer our thanksgiving to you. Throughout this week past, we were aware of the many ways you bless us. Even in the few short hours we have been awake today, we have experienced your grace and goodness in many ways. Thank you, O God.

We are also thankful for the good work that was done this past week in our community. We are grateful for neighbors who were willing to open their homes and hearts to us, to young people and adults who were eager to do everything in their power to make homes safe and beautiful again, and to all of the individuals, churches, and businesses that united in an astounding community of love which acted out its deepest beliefs.

We continue to pray for the families who were helped and for each neighborhood that was touched by your love this week. May the power of that love continue to triumph over poverty, loneliness, fear, and violence to enhance the life of our community.

As we offer our praise, we also share our needs. Some of us are ill and need the healing power of your Spirit. Some of us are tired and seek your comfort and renewal. Others of us are sad or lonely or deeply grieved. We want to feel loved and glimpse the hope that is surely ours. Many of us seek guidance for decisions that have to be made or for courage to do what is good and right for us. All of us want to know that you are near us and with us.

We thank you, O God, for a world that is full of life. We apologize for the ways in which we have brought harm and death into your creation. We pray for a renewal of all of life that will energize again your dream of what life can be for us all. Make us partners in that mission, we pray, that we might continue to sing our joy and praise through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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