

August 15, 2021
Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
“All Will Be Well”
Micah 6:8 ~ Ephesians 5:15-20 ~ John 6:51-58

I've spent some time these past few days walking around this church ... and I want you to know that every space in this temple ... Oakland Christian United Church of Christ ... is holy. We've experienced so many sacred, holy moments in this place. We've baptized children whose births were prayed for. We've offered and received the grace of the Lord's Supper. We've watched the word of God fall upon the faces of people so hungry to hear that God loves them, too, that they wept when they heard it. We've said goodbye ... for now ... to some of the dearest souls we ever knew. We have faith that we will see them again. This is such a holy space ... the intersection of heaven and earth. "Surely the Lord is in this place," and we know it. But as holy as this place is ... it's still just a building. While it is bricks and mortar ... you are flesh and blood. You are the Body of Christ!

So, let me try to tell you what you people mean to me. We've been through some profound stretches in our journey together ... we've climbed some mountains ... we've walked some valleys. We've prayed together at hospital beds and gravesides ... at fellowship feasts and house parties ... in long committee meetings. We've offered hope to the hopeless ... friendship to the friendless. We've raised our candles on Christmas Eve and we've extinguished the light on Good Friday. And praise God, we've shared our "Alleluias!" again on Easter morning. We've learned each other's quirks ... put up with each other's flaws ... rejoiced in each other's victories ... and wept with each other's sorrows. We've responded to people's pain ... and stood arm in arm and preached together that God's love leaves no one out. You are a diverse ... thought-provoking ... caring ... hilarious ... ennobling ... and amazing church ... and I will miss you more than you can ever know. God loves you and brought you here to be a part of a very special people ... and it has been my privilege and joy to have served alongside you.

It takes something to be a part of this church ... and it means something ... and that leads me to speak of what the mission and vision of this church mean to me. You are like every church ... called by God to embody the presence of Christ and proclaim the gospel in the place where God has planted you. But you are unique in

your mission in this place and time. You have a calling to love the Lord our God with all your minds ... to have a thoughtful, intelligent faith ... engaging the intellectual currents of our day with the gospel of Christ. You are called to participate in the life of this community with concern for the quality of life for all God's people ... those churched and unchurched. As the priesthood of the believers, you have a calling to stand firm on our UCC principles of a free church in a free state ... a democracy of the Spirit where you make decisions together as spiritual equals ... by open processes with consensus and trust ... soul competency ... liberty of conscience ... and spiritual freedom. As the church in the bend, you have a calling to open the doors of God's house for all the people that God sends you, but not to forget your partnership with other churches to carry this gospel of God's grace to every corner of the world.

I never tired of seeing the way you responded when God sent a new challenge along. God asked, "Will you support my beloved across the world?" You said, "Yes!" God said, "Will you feed the hungry ... clothe the naked ... visit the sick ... welcome the stranger ... show mercy to the despised and rejected ... visit the prisoner ... lift up the brokenhearted ... forgive the fallen? Will you be the beloved community of God?" You said, "Yes!" God asked, "Will you love each other through it all? Will you be Christ to each other?" You said, "Yes, yes, yes!"

And it cost you. Each answer to God's call costs you. I don't mean the money. I don't mean the wear and tear on the building. I don't even mean the way we get marginalized when we stand with the marginalized. There's a reason many churches don't do the things that you have done ... and find excuses or defenses when God invites them to these tasks. This kind of ministry ... with this kind of diversity ... is hard to do. It stretches you. It pushes you. And God knows, most people go to church to feel comfortable and happy and good about themselves. Well, you've tested the limits. Can this radical message that God loves every person so we will, too, ever really work? I've decided, no it won't ... not unless we give ourselves over to Jesus ... Jesus who sees every person as God's holy temple. Not unless we are so filled by Christ's love for us that we can love each other with his love ... because we're just not that loving or forgiving or accepting or caring on our own. No one is!

I believe in your vision and mission so deeply. I believe the world needs that vision and mission fulfilled in the ways you have sought to fulfill it. I believe the church in the world needs churches like this that call them forward. I believe you need this church with its unique and courageous voice ... and that's why God has called you here.

I felt staggered by even the thought of writing the last sermon that I will preach from this pulpit. I knew that I wanted you to know ... that in the words of Julian of Norwich ... “All will be well, all will be well, and all matter of things will be well” ... because as Easter people we know this to be true. But I also knew that I was not up to the task.

And then I remembered to whom I would be preaching. You are the people whose lives are the sermon. You are the people who chose these words as your statement of purpose: *To share God’s love with all people; to service the Lord with humility and kindness; and to grow with the Lord in wisdom and strength.* How can we hear those words without remembering Micah 6:8? *And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*

At first glance, Micha’s words don’t seem too difficult ... three Hebrew words ... *mishpat, chesed* and *halak*.

Mishpat: justice – God requires us “to do justice.” The verb “to do” emphasizes that this is not an ideal, but a practice. It is not a concept, but an ethic. It is not some grand philosophy ... it is a requirement to actively engage the world. Justice is about the equal treatment of all people. Justice is about the equal opportunity for all people. Justice is about insuring that all people have a fair share and that not one person is left out. Justice is about living simply, about being satisfied with having enough and about sharing with those who don’t. Justice is about community. Justice is about being right in our relationships and it is about demanding the right social systems in the land. Doing justice begins with the courage and willingness to listen to the cries of pain and anger “from below.”

In both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, justice is inseparably linked with “righteousness” ... with being right with God ... right with others ... right with creation. There is more than enough food for everyone on earth to survive. There is more than enough space for everyone to have shelter. There is more than enough wealth for everyone to be helped. But children starve, and the homeless wander, and the poor suffer because 10% of the world’s population controls what the other 90% need. We in the top 10% praise God ... that we are blessed ...but God cries *mishpat!* And that you have preached!

The second Hebrew word is *chesed* – kindness. Micha understood, and we must remember today, that doing justice is interrelated and dependent upon loving kindness. If we do not heed Micha’s words to love kindness, then our struggles for justice become just one more ideological and dehumanizing crusade. Our love will be consumed by anger ... our hope will be eaten up by cynicism ... our meaningful action will be exhausted by busyness. We will begin to see the world as filled with

adversaries ... we will lose sight of the good. We will know what we are against, but we will forget what we are for. That is why our charge for justice must be connected to the tenderness of love. *Chesed* is about staying true to God's purpose and God's people. It is about living in community. It is about yearning for and striving toward the "beloved community." It is about enduring, forbearing, forgiving – keeping faith with God and with each other. And that you have preached!

And finally, *halak*: to walk. To walk humbly with God implies a continual accompaniment ... a constant companionship. To walk humbly with God means that we live our lives before God ... with a constant awareness of the Divine Presence. To walk humbly with God means we are never alone or abandoned.

There is a marvelous ambiguity to this phrase, as Walter Bruggeman observes. It could certainly be interpreted to mean that we walk humbly because God is magnificent...awe inspiring...holy. But we can also interpret this to mean that we walk humbly because God took on human flesh and walked humbly among us ... and does so even now. This third admonition ... to walk humbly with God ... reminds us that the spiritual struggle that undergirds the struggle for justice ... the wellspring of divine love that renews and enlivens tender compassion ... is our daily companionship with God who is humble enough to walk with us ... step by step ... through each year ... through each day ... through each hour of our lives. And that you have preached!

Mishpat, chesed, halak: These three may embody all that we need to know, but they are not virtues per se. They are not three things to put on our "to do" lists. Rather, they are three interrelated dimensions of the life of faithfulness ... each one depending on and reinforced by the others. For us to be genuinely and biblically prophetic, for us to respond to the charge given to us with courage and strength, all three of these requirements must remain interrelated and in balance. And we are granted the grace ... this day and every day ... to do so ... to do justice ... to love kindness ... and to walk humbly with our God. And that you have lived ... and that you have preached!

Let us pray.

Gracious and loving God, assure those gathered here. whose lives are a living sermon, that all will be well. As they receive your grace, help them remember who and whose they are ... that they might live and love and act not out of their own resources, but from the center of your abiding presence in our hearts. All this and more we pray, in the name of your precious Son, Jesus, our Lord. Amen.