

**More Than Just Lip Service**  
**The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC**  
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*Micah 5:2-5, 6:1-8; Matthew 9:13*

The secret to good comedy, I'm told, is poking fun at the truth. A joke about something that would never happen isn't nearly as funny as a joke about something that has happened, or something that could have happened.

A few years ago at a Golden Globes award show, comedian Tina Fey said this...

*"George Clooney married Amal Alamuddin this year. Amal is a human rights lawyer who worked on the Enron case, was an advisor to Kofi Annan regarding Syria and was selected for a three-person UN commission investigating rules of war violations in the Gaza strip ... So tonight, her husband is getting a lifetime achievement award."*

Everything Tina Fey said was absolutely true, and it was the irony of the situation that made it funny. Fey wasn't just poking fun at this celebrity couple; she was poking fun at America's priorities, and the priorities of all countries of privilege. We prize what we shouldn't over things we should.

We give lifetime achievement awards to movie stars, not diplomats. We distract ourselves with the clothing that famous people wear and choose not to think about the sweatshop conditions which led to its creation. We give multi-million dollar contracts to athletes, not social workers, and then wonder why ticket prices are so high.

The prophet Micah says that God requires three things of us: that we do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. Justice, kindness and humility -- are any of these three qualities valued in our culture?

We give lip service to justice. We pray for it and say that we want a more just world. Someone once said that if you want to know what someone's values are, don't ask them. Instead, just look at their calendar and their bank statement. See the way they spend their time and the way they spend their money.

We can assess our communal priorities the same way, can't we? As a culture, what do we spend our money on? What grabs our headlines?

To be fair, one of the hard things about doing justice is that we don't really know what that means. Making other changes can be simple (in theory, anyway!)...

If you want to lose weight, you eat less and exercise more.

If you want to make your relationships better, you spend more time with the people you value.

If you want to save money, you spend less time shopping and more time clipping coupons.

But how do you bring about justice?

Micah was a small town prophet in the 8th century BC who noticed something happening. Israel had turned from the way of love. The powerful among them wanted more land and prestige. They held these big religious parties, singing psalms and practicing rituals and having feasts, all in hopes that God would bless them.

Meanwhile, behind the scenes, people were suffering. The fatherless were cast out, widows were hungry, the foreigners in the land were unprotected.

What was really going on was the Israelites were masking the suffering of those outside their circle, trying to pretend it really wasn't there. So Micah comes along and says that can't be, this can't be God's way.

So he reminded them of what their God required: Act Justly, Love Mercy, Walk Humbly with your God. How we might say that today is Love God, Love People.

To act justly is kind of like holding a big umbrella that covers all people. It covers the fatherless, the motherless, the widow, the stranger, the foreigner. Micah is saying to them that holding that umbrella is actually their biggest act of worship. It's not singing songs or saying the right prayers, it's simply taking care of others. That's what is at the root of what it is to be a person of faith.

Jesus echoed his words, saying that God loves mercy, not sacrifice. We can't pray our way into heaven. What's most important is caring for the least.

And about that last part, to walk humbly. That just means that we have to be willing to go where God goes, and follow God's way. And God's way is love, that's it. It's a love that is broad and expansive and reaches across tongues, borders and races.

The most important thing any one of us will ever do in our lives is follow God's way of love. Not chase after power. Not chase after land. Not pretend that there aren't bad things happening. Your greatest act of worship is to show compassion to others.

What gets in the way of that? Sometimes we tell ourselves, *"The world has always been unfair; there's nothing I can do about it, so I'm just going to mind my own business, take care of myself, and not think about it."* It's a kind of self-protection when we are tempted to turn inward and shut ourselves off from the enormity of the world's grief.

The other thing we do is compare ourselves to those who have much more than we do, and to look to them to make a difference. Let LeBron James and Bill Gates and all of the other millionaires and billionaires fix the world. While it's true that there are big foundations that do a lot of good work in the world, I don't think they are going to be around next week to handle the emotional needs of a five year old taken from her parents into emergency foster care.

Sometimes, we overcomplicate our response. When we look at the life of Jesus, we see someone who didn't wait for the perfect time to act. He didn't set up committees to talk about problems. He looked people in the eye and did what he could for them in that moment. He shared his food with the hungry, and found that it didn't run out. He paid attention to the ones everyone else ignored, and saw them as human beings and beloved children of God.

Preacher Tony Campolo tells the story about a homeless lady who one day went to Nordstrom's Department store, which as you know is a very fancy, high-end place.

Her clothes were dirty, her stockings had rolled down to her ankles. As she slowly shuffled in, she held a gym bag in her hand. It was obvious that this woman was out of place and that she would not be able to buy anything. Most of the dresses were in the thousand dollar price range. At any moment a security guard would arrive and usher her out of the store, but instead, a stately saleswoman came over to her and asked, *"May I help you, madam?"*

The homeless woman said, *"Yeah, I want to buy a dress."*

*"What kind of dress?"* the saleswoman asked in a polite and dignified way.

*"A party dress."*

*"You've come to the right place. Follow me. I think we have some of the finest party dresses available."*

The saleswoman spent the better part of an hour matching dresses with the woman's eye color and helping her decide which dress would go best with her complexion and preferred taste. After selecting three that they together decided would be good choices, she took the woman into the dressing room. After about ten minutes of trying on the dresses with the saleswoman's help, the homeless woman said abruptly, *"I've changed my mind. I'm not going to buy a dress today."*

*"That's all right,"* the saleswoman said gently, *"but here's my card. Should you come back to Nordstrom department store, I do hope that you will ask for me. I would consider it a privilege to wait on you again."*

The saleswoman happened to be wearing a pin with the letters, WWJD on it. She could have just as easily had Micah 6:8 on it.

What would it mean for us to create a new world, what Martin Luther King called *"a beloved community"*, a society that valued justice, kindness and humility above all else?

What would that look like?

How satisfying would it be for us to dedicate our lives to that work?

Maybe it means teaching our children that there's no greater calling than fulfilling the call to serve -- so that whether they want to be nurses, teachers, social workers, first responders, coaches in the inner city or politicians, we encourage them?

Would it mean confessing that we have made idols of celebrities, and that we have been jealous of their fame and fortune, and need to refocus on lifting up those --of every walk of life-- who show generosity and kindness to others?

Would it mean admitting that maybe we don't have all the answers on how to bring about a more just world, and asking God to open our eyes to the steps we can take together and individually, that would make a difference?

Please join me in praying together: *Thank you, God, for your words of challenge. Show us how to do justice. Inspire us to love kindness. Give us the gift of humility so that we can walk with you every step of the way, through this life, and into the next. And thank you for Jesus who has walked this way before us and even now is still showing us the way. Amen.*