

## RESTART JUSTICE

Micah 6:8

Kelly Boyte Brill  
Avon Lake UCC  
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My husband and I are movie buffs and we binged on movies around Christmas time. So when we had an evening at home last Sunday, we watched the Golden Globe awards to see if our opinions about favorite movies and actors would match those of the critics. Comedians Amy Poehler and Tina Fey were the hosts of the award show. They know that the secret to good comedy 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. Good comedy can be thought-provoking.

Those two created a very funny moment Sunday night. The line belonged to Tina Fey, who said, "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. She didn't have to engage in any elaborate joke-writing. It was the irony of the situation that made it funny. It is humor that pricks our conscience and makes us think. Fey was not 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 give multimillion dollar contracts to athletes, not social workers.

We prize fame and fortune over the work of justice and mercy. We distract ourselves with movies and the dresses that actresses wear, choosing not to think about the glaring inequalities that exist in our world. We treat professional athletes and the organizations that surround them like gods, never batting an eye when it costs more and more to attend a game.

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. We 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, look at their calendar and their bank statement. See the way they spend their time and the way they spend their money. That was said of individuals, but 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. 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? It's complicated and messy work. But it's not impossible.

“What does God require of us but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God?”

These beautiful words come from the prophet Micah. Micah was a prophet in the 8th century BC who was from a small village. In Micah’s time and place, he saw injustice. He saw poor farm workers who were suffering at the hands of powerful landlords. He knew that if justice was to come at all, it would have to come from the people who were suffering. The people in power don’t want to give up their comfort, their prosperity, their security. So Micah calls upon all of the people to remember their God-given values. Remember the Ten Commandments. Remember God calling the people of Israel to care for the widows and the orphans. The God of Israel does not call upon the rich to get richer at the expense of the poor; the God of Israel is a God of justice and a God of compassion.

The work of justice and the work of humility both begin when we recognize that we have been given far more than we deserve. Even the poorest among us in this room today have far more material possessions than the vast majority of people in the world. Despite the acts of violence we all mourn in this country, we all benefit from living in relatively peaceful and secure communities, when we look at the way much of the rest of the world lives. Regardless of challenges, our opportunities exceed that of most other groups of people.

We did not do anything to earn or deserve these good fortunes. And there’s absolutely no point in feeling guilty about them. The point is, “What are we going to do with our blessings?” How can we use them to help bring about a more just and peaceful world?

There are two tendencies many of us fight against. One is the tendency to think, “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 the rest of the world.” It’s the temptation to turn inward and shut ourselves off from the world’s problems.

The other tendency is to compare ourselves to those few people who have more than we do, and to look to them to make a difference. Let George Clooney and Lebron James and Bill Gates and all of the other millionaires and billionaires fix the world.

But Micah doesn’t say, “Turn you back on injustice.” He doesn’t say, “Let injustice be someone else’s problem.” He says, simply, “do justice.” Let’s look at the life of Jesus and see a person who didn’t wait for the perfect time to act. He didn’t set up committees and talk about problems. He looked people in the eye and did what he could for them. He shared his food with the hungry. He paid attention to the people everyone else ignored.

I believe each one of us here has a passion for justice. There is a cause each of us cares about. For some it may involve writing letters to government officials about foreign policy or gun control or the environment. For some it may involve serving on city council and trying to make our community better. For some it may be volunteering at our sister church, St. Paul’s and getting involved in the lives of those who are homeless, many of whom are mentally ill, many of whom are veterans. Some of our members today are training to become volunteers in our IHN/Family Promise program as we host homeless families right here in our church.

What happens when you serve at a soup kitchen, or deliver meals, or go on a mission trip, is that your heart expands. You realize that your own life is enriched by acts of kindness. It is not a drudgery. And you find yourself closer to God.

Here's a quote that reminds us that kindness has its own reward: "Kindness is an inner desire that makes us want to do good things even if we do not get anything in return. It is the joy of our life to do them."

Now there are people who would argue with this sermon. There are people who say that the most important thing is to put an end to systemic injustice. Don't put a bandaid on problems. Don't volunteer at a soup kitchen. Instead, work for a society where all people have equal opportunity. Well, I think it all matters. Some people are motivated to hold protest signs and work for laws to be changed, and some people are motivated to write checks, and some people feel called to tutor those who are illiterate. If it comes from the heart, it all matters.

I don't think we wait for the perfect program which no one could criticize. I think we act when we feel God's spirit at work within us. So I think all of these things work together for good: (images on screen of random acts of kindness)

This is a picture of Captain Ron Johnson of the Missouri Highway Patrol last summer during the unrest in Ferguson, Missouri. Before he went to work one night, he was prayed for and prayed over. He is credited with helping to calm tensions in Ferguson. A member of law enforcement, he also walked side by side with the protestors. He sharply changed the tone of the relationship between the police and the protestors. He worked within his sphere of influence; he shows us that one person can make a difference.

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? Would it mean baby steps, like teaching our children that there’s no greater calling than fulfilling the deepest and best desires of our hearts -- so that whether they want to be missionaries, nurses, teachers, social workers, coaches in the inner city, police officers, or politicians, we encourage them?

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

Would it mean admitting that we don’t know how to bring about a more just world, and asking God to open our eyes to the steps we can take 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 who is showing us the way. Amen.

Thanks to the following for inspiration for this sermon: “Rethinking Lifetime Achievement”, by Mark Lockard; and “God Requires What?”, by Angela Ying.