

WE CALL OURSELVES *Disciples*

Resources for Preachers and Congregations

Session 1

To Live the Word in Deed

Corresponding Resources

Chapters 1 and 2 in *We Call Ourselves Disciples*

Video Session 1

Topics

The Bible and the Work of Justice

Focus Scriptures

Micah 6:6-8; 2 Timothy 3:14-17

Exegetical Reflection

By Laura Jean Torgerson

Micah 6:6-8

It is hard for most modern people to appreciate how centrally important the ritual of sacrifice was to ancient religion. We tend to assume that the questions in verses 6 and 7 are rhetorical—*of course* the people seeking to return to God should not humbly present God with burnt offerings, calves, rams, olive oil, much less a human child! For Micah's audience, however, these seemed like they were probably the right answer.

Not only for ancient Israelites, but also for their neighboring cultures (and, in Jesus' day, Jews and Greek and Roman cultures as well), making sacrifices on altars was understood as the most fundamental religious activity, the way to connect with God (whether YHWH, Baal, or other gods and goddesses). The psalmist poetically expresses this in Psalm 27, in response to an experience of deliverance, promising that "I will offer in God's tent sacrifices with shouts of joy," and then praying "Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and

answer me... your face, O Lord, do I seek.” Offering sacrifice in the temple (or tent of the tabernacle) was the means of giving thanks and seeking God’s presence, of bridging the divide between human and divine.

For modern Disciples, the most equivalent “default religious practice” could be partaking of the Lord’s Supper. It is gathered at the Table that many people most palpably experience God’s presence. But some communities or individuals might connect to God most powerfully through other religious activities: reading the Bible, attending church, praying, singing, making financial offerings, or even listening to Christian music, being in nature, or spending time in meditation and prayer. Can you imagine having this conversation? What should we do to return to God, to be more faithful? Add a Wednesday night communion service? Increase the number of congregants participating in weekly Bible study? Pray more?

It is also worth noting that the proposed remedies, ways to respond to God’s gracious and faithful saving acts, are not only extreme, they are large, showy actions.

Somehow, the response requires less translation: do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God. This response both is and is not surprising. It is surprising because these actions are not dramatic enactments of “religious” behavior. Rather, they are daily practices of right relationship with God *and* other humans. On the other hand, the response is consistent with God’s nature. It is God who exercises justice, loves compassion, and promises steadfast presence. In addition, “walking with God” is a common biblical metaphor for faithful living. By acting like God, working for justice and showing mercy, we may find ourselves, humbly and unexpectedly, in God’s very presence.

2 Timothy 3:14-17

The “mortal” of Micah 6:8 stands in for the whole people of God, and Timothy in this letter represents a generation raised in faith within the Christian movement. He was brought up in this faith by his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice (1:5). With this solid foundation and all he learned from Paul, the letter writer appeals to Timothy to lead his community away from false teachers.

In this final charge (vv. 10-17), we see the common biblical motif of “the two ways” – a choice between two possible paths. The central conflict is between truth and deception. Timothy is urged to persist in the correct way, and to lead others along that path as well. The “person of God” is set in contrast to the “wicked people” (v.13) who “go from bad to worse, deceiving others and being deceived.” To avoid being led astray, he should “continue” --*meno* a verb often

translated as remain or abide— in what he has learned and believed, drawing on the models of those who taught him: Lois, Eunice, and Paul, as well as the scriptures he has known all his life.

The scriptures are commended to Timothy, and any person of God as useful in the midst of these disputes. (The poetic description of scripture as God-breathed or inspired is an aside, not part of the central focus here.) Two of these uses are positive: teaching and training, and two are negative, that is, can be used to counter false teaching by reproof and correction. The list of uses also builds to the final most important: training in righteousness, preparing the person who belongs to God for good works. It is striking that even in the midst of this conflict over doctrinal disputes, the ultimate emphasis is not on having the right answers, but on right living.

Questions for group discussion or individual reflection

1. What are the religious activities in today's world that might be parallel to offering extravagant sacrifice for Micah's audience? What is your default definition of religious practice? How do you draw closer to God?
2. Have you had surprising experiences of God's presence while working for justice, showing kindness, or in daily living?
3. Who are the people in your life and the life of your congregation and/or family from whom you learned your faith? How did they embody this faith?
4. When have you found scripture to be useful for keeping you and others on the right track? If you have not, in what other ways has it been useful to your community?
5. As you think about being part of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), consider how your congregation engages the Bible. How do you study scripture? What role does scripture play in the life of your church?
6. In what ways do the scriptures inform and inspire your church to be a witness for God's justice in the world? How might God be calling your congregation to act for justice in your community?
7. Do you agree that "if there were more justice, there would be less need for charity"? In what ways does your congregation understand and embody the distinction between charity and justice?
8. In a highly polarized world, how can Disciples read the Bible in ways that foster unity and encourage us to do justice?

Consider This

1. How can your sermon, or your preaching generally, invite people to have “serious interactions” with the Bible outside of the preaching moment in worship?
2. How can your sermons nurture *courage* for justice work?
3. How open is your congregation to the deliberative theological process? How can you model for them an openness to exploring different theological views?

Disciples at Work

Explore the work of the National Benevolent Association. How could your congregation get more connected with this work?

Learn more: <https://www.nbacares.org/>

In Your Own Context

1. In your congregation, what role does the Bible play in the business/ administrative (non-liturgical) aspects of the church?
2. Why is it necessary that we acknowledge and “grapple” (p9) with our complicated history as part of our justice work?

Hymn Suggestions

(CH: *Chalice Hymnal*; CP: *Chalice Praise*)

“What Does the Lord Require of You?” CH 661

“Break Thou the Bread of Life” CH 321

“Open My Eyes, That I May See” CH 586

“For Everyone Born” CH 428

“Help Us Accept Each Other” CH 487

“Micah 6:8” CP 174

Call to Worship

From Psalm 37

Leader: Enjoy the Lord, and God will give what your heart asks.

People: Commit your way to the Lord! Trust God!

Leader: God will act and will make your righteousness shine like the dawn,
your justice like high noon.

People: Be still before the Lord, and wait for him. Hope in the Lord and keep
God's way!

All: The salvation of the righteous comes from the Lord; God is our refuge in
times of trouble.

Prayer

Living God, be good to us so that we may live and keep your word. Open our eyes so we can examine the wonders of your word for us each day. May your law, which requires of us justice, faithful love, and humility, be our light and our joy. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, your Word for us. Amen!