

Sunday, August 7, 2011
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon - "What Does the Lord Require of You?"

Integrity.

What does the word "integrity" mean to you?

Webster's dictionary defines it three ways:

1. adherence to moral and ethical principles; soundness of moral character; honesty
2. the state of being whole, entire, or undiminished
3. a sound, unimpaired, or perfect condition.

Micah defines it as steadfast commitment to the covenant, adherence to God's commands and ongoing belief in God's promise.

For Micah, faith is the ability to rely on the promises of God. The question behind Micah's book is 'How can God use Israel as the medium of his blessing on all nations when Israel is sinful?'

At the time Micah was writing the territory of Judah was rife with oppression of the poor, corrupt courts and judges, dishonest commercial practices, false prophecy, greedy priests, loss of communal order and abhorrence of God's justice and commandments.

Micah simply could not see any way that God would want to choose these wayward people of his as stewards of God's mysteries.

But God, steadfast in his love of Israel perseveres in calling the people to accept the promise with which they have been entrusted.

All of chapter 6 is a court case between the Lord and his covenant people.

The Lord is the plaintiff;

Israel is the accused; and the mountains, the hills and the pillars of the earth are the witnesses and jury.

God asks the people, "In what way have I wearied you?"

He is longing for his people to uphold their end of the covenant.

God's attitude toward our wrongdoing is manifested, not so much in wrath, as in grief.

He laments, "What have I done that you would act this way."

God demonstrates true integrity in that he continues to forgive, regardless of the transgressions, because He made a promise to Abraham.

God's forgives in order to show faithfulness to his promise.

The people reply with a sarcastic tone asking, "Well, what would you have us do?"

Do you want burnt offerings, young calves, a thousand rams, ten thousands of rivers of oil?

Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"

Exaggeration is such an effective tool to shut down communication.

Here is God, weeping over the weariness of his people and the people mock him.

The prophet, however, answers in one of the most familiar verses in the bible,

"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?"

I love these words.

This was the first scripture passage that I ever committed to memory.

These were the first words that resonated with me as truth in scripture.

Writer Elizabeth Achtemeier takes these words to their roots and explains that justice, *mispat*, means to order one's life according to God's will;

Kindness, *heset*, translates as covenant love – a love that binds us together in community;

Humility, *hasane'a*, means attentiveness in walking with God, not just modesty, but paying careful attention to.

These are our instructions.

This is how we must strive to order our own lives. It is not easy in this day and age to uphold one's integrity.

Last week was an interesting time for Joe and me as we endeavor to sell our house. A potential buyer had several questions regarding the property. There were some questions about the septic system. We referred the agent to the company we had used for the past fourteen years. The company said that they had no record of maintenance prior to 2005. That left a gap of seven years without maintenance. We assured the agent that we had used this service since 1998. She said, perhaps we were mistaken and we had used another company. We began to doubt our own sanity.

Fortunately, Joe saves receipts and we were able to demonstrate that we had paid this company annually, since 1998, for service. A similar scenario happened with the oil

company. We have had the same oil company since we bought our first house 20 years ago.

When the agent contacted them for information regarding work they had done in 1998 to secure an underground tank, they said that they had no records. Again, knowing that we had hired them to install the new tank and deal with the old one, we were perplexed.

Finally, after several days of exchanging faxes and memos, they did acknowledge that they may have done the work, but that they couldn't guarantee it.

The final episode in integrity challenge was not related to the house.

I received a call from the Life Insurance company that has been trying to clear me for insurance since I started working here in January. There has been an ongoing problem with the company getting access to some of my medical records.

So the conversation went like this:

"Ms Monti-Catania, you have indicated in your application that you had brain surgery in 2000 at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York." I replied, "that is correct."

"Well, the hospital has no record of that."

"I'm not sure what to say."

"Did you have surgery in 2000 at Mt. Sinai Hospital?"

"Yes, I did."

"Why do you think they have no record of this?"

"I don't know."

"Well, I will have to explore this further. We will get back to you."

"OK"

Why on earth would I lie about having brain surgery? Or pumping septic tanks or underground oil tanks?

All three instances were simply a result of sloppy record keeping.

However, the point is, in each circumstance, rather than acknowledging that there might be a mistake, each party dismissed our claims as false and shed doubt on our integrity.

I found myself feeling defensive – as if I had done something wrong. I think that this is pervasive in our society. Rather than expecting honesty and integrity from one another, we expect the opposite.

People often blame someone else for their distress, or suspect that someone who seems honest and upright must be hiding something.

Again, as in weeks past, we realize that we are not terribly different from our biblical ancestors.

We have a choice however.

God, according to Micah, agrees to carry on with just the remnant of people who are left.

God acknowledges that all is not well, but he will stay with us and uphold his end of the covenant.

God promises, again, not to abandon us.

In Jesus Christ, God renewed his promise.

We are the remnant.

We are the covenant people.

We can make a choice to carry on.

We must not succumb to society's increased secularity.

God has chosen us, or we have chosen God, as lifelong covenant partners.

Micah says, in closing,

Who is a Godlike you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression of the remnant of your possession? He does not retain his anger forever because he delights in showing clemency. He will again have compassion upon us.

We can take that knowledge and use it to excuse any behaviors that might not be laudable or we can use it to motivate ourselves to uphold our part of the covenant.

We can celebrate that our God's steadfast love is eternal and that God upholds his promises.

We can commit ourselves to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God.

Let's be the ones who chose *mispat, heset, and hasane'a* as a way of life.