

What Does God Require of You?

Rev. Dr. Michael Piazza

Mardi Gras Sunday, March 3, 2019

Micah 6:1-8/ Luke 9:28-36

If you've read the Harry Potter books you know that "Polyjuice Potion" is one of the most difficult for young wizards to learn to make. It is an apparently wretched tasting drink that contains a hair from the person you want to be transformed into. The transformation is apparently an unpleasant process, and it is only temporary. The trouble is you never know when it will wear off.

This morning, we will be serving "Polyjuice Potion" at communion. That seems appropriate as we prepare to embark on the transformational journey we call "Lent." This is why the church puts the transfiguration readings on the Sunday before Lent begins.



The point of Lent is not suffering, or sacrifice, or self-denial; the point is to entice us into transformation/transfiguration.

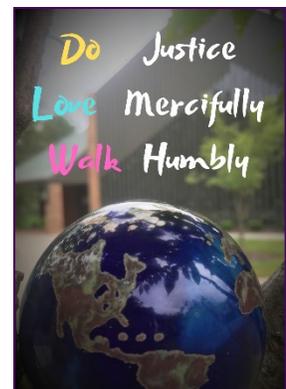
My grandparents were Italian immigrants who took Lent VERY seriously. Although I was inspired by the devotion of their Catholic faith, the restrictions and requirements of Lent probably are part of the reason I became a Protestant. So, this verse from Micah—*God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*—which is going to be our theme for Lent, is a quandary for me. You see, it talks about what God requires of us.

Truthfully, we don't seem to mind when God requires some things of us. God made us in such a way that we require sleep and food, just like plants require light and water, and I'm kind of glad about that.

Somewhat less tangibly, but no less emphatically, God formed us in such a way that we also require love, affection, and human connection. Children in institutions can get adequate exercise and nutrition and still waste away and die unless they also get love and affection. They are required.

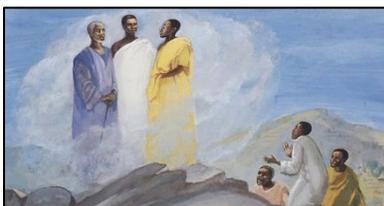
Micah is trying to tell us that, just as food, water, rest, and even affection are required for our physical health, so, too, there are requirements for the health of our souls:

- Do justice.
- Love mercifully.
- Walk humbly with God.



This is what God requires of us if we are to be healthy, holy, human. Micah goes on to say that this should come as no surprise because God already has shown us.

Think about it. Who are the people you think of as good? Who are your heroes and saints? I bet they are people who work for justice, live with kindness, and walk with humility. God has shown us what is good and what is required to be healthy humans.



Today is Transfiguration Sunday. Mardi Gras is, of course, Tuesday, and Lent begins on Wednesday. This year at First Presbyterian Church of New Canaan, we

are will spend Lent looking at what God requires and what is, ultimately, transformational for our souls.

Mercy and justice actually are two sides of the same coin:

- Mercy feeds the poor. Justice asks: why are they poor?
- Mercy shelters the homeless. Justice works for economic equality.
- Mercy picks up litter. Justice tries to reduce pollution.

The world needs both of these forces for good, and so do our souls.

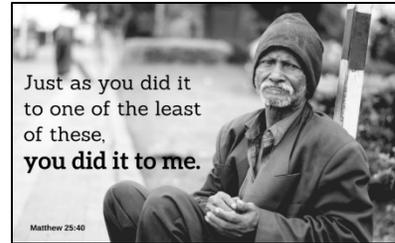
Seminary students preparing for the ministry were taking their final exams. The topic was Immanuel Kant's "moral imperatives." The students had two hours to write a reflection on what they believed to be the moral imperatives for humanity.

They wrote furiously for an hour and then took a break. They poured into the hallway, stretching and complaining. In the hall, there was another student, not part of their class, sitting slumped up on the floor, disheveled, looking a mess.

After about 15 minutes, having gotten sips of water from the fountain and used the restroom, the students finished their conversations and returned for the second hour of writing.

Later, when their grades were posted, every student discovered they had passed the course, but failed the test. You see they thought the essay was the test, but, during the break, the professor stood in the hall grading them on their response to the student slumped on the floor. Nobody even spoke to him. Their final exam was based on who they are, not what they know.

In Matthew 25, Jesus plainly says that this is how our life's final grade will be determined. How we treat the least, how we do justice, how we love mercifully.



There are more than a million nonprofits in America. Many do great acts of mercy and compassion. Others work hard for a more just world. Humanity is indebted to them for both.

As a church, it is Micah's third requirement that distinguishes us from other nonprofits that are doing good. We do what we do as an expression of our faith, as people of the Way of Jesus. Like a three-legged stool, we believe the health and wholeness of our lives require us to seek to meet a third imperative: Walk humbly with your God.



I grew up in fundamentalist churches in the South, but life forced me to question much of what I learned there. Rethinking what I believed made me ask many questions: Can I take the Bible seriously without taking it literally? Can I believe in the power of faith without believing in magical thinking? I'll confess, burying the love of your life and hundreds of your friends can make you pretty cynical about magic.

Over the years, I've discarded much of what I once believed, but I also fell in love with Jesus all over again. I'm not ashamed to say that, although I am theologically liberal, I also am a radically-devoted follower of Jesus.

Progressive faith means you don't claim to have all the answers or to have God packaged in a neat little box with religious clichés for bows. We live with the

questions and walk humbly with our God because “walking” implies that we have not arrived.

Humility means that we value our journey and allow others to walk their own paths.

Marcus Borg was my favorite heretic, but I find him one of the most deeply Christian people I've known. In a lecture, he said:



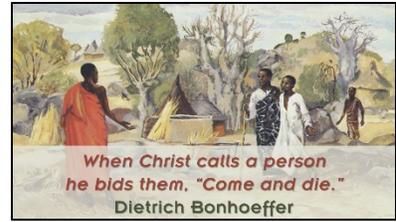
The central symbol for the alternative way of Jesus is death and resurrection. The cross is a metaphor for an internal, psychological spiritual path. It is dying to an old version of who we are and being born into a new way of being. Death and resurrection is a metaphor for the internal, psychological, spiritual path. That is why the born-again experience is at the very center of the Christian life.

Dr. Borg goes on to say:

It's unfortunate that we have let our conservative brothers and sisters have a monopoly on born-again language. One reason we've done that, I think, is that all of us know at least one person who was born-again as a jerk.

That is funny, but all too true. We all have had relatives or friends who “got religion” only to become as judgmental as they once were irresponsible. The trouble is they didn't get the religion of Jesus, and neither did we, unless we have the courage to believe we are beloved and that everyone else is, too. Only then can we humbly walk with God.

Jesus is our model for how life should be, but all that is within us resists the method of transformation that Jesus prescribes. He bids us come and die with him that we might be born anew.



We all love Easter, but we avoid Lent at all cost. However, Easter requires a Good Friday. For there to be a resurrection, something has to die.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday. I don't know what happened on the mountain that day. The mystical language of the Gospels leaves us scratching our heads, but something transfigured Jesus. Perhaps it was something Moses or Elijah said to him, or maybe it was simply that, on the mountain that day, Jesus heard again the word God spoke over him at his baptism: "Beloved."

I used to work with a congregation who struggled to believe they were beloved, so I would tell them, "If you want to feel good about yourself, be a good person." When we aren't good people, I'm not sure we should feel good. Micah says we know what is good and what is required: Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly. That is the path to transfiguration.

The butterfly long has been a symbol of resurrection. The chrysalis looks for all the world like the tomb of the caterpillar, but we know it really is the womb of transformation. Don't leave this illustration without recognizing that not only does the caterpillar enter the cocoon willingly, she also is the one who weaves it.



And so, the church calls us to observe a holy Lent in the hope that, out of this chrysalis, we can weave a new life. AMEN.