

I was so bold as to suggest last week that, from time to time, Jesus rattled the cages of the scribes and the Pharisees, and that if we take his words seriously, they might rattle our cages too. Then I cited a survey the Session will conduct in the new year, to rattle our own cages. Today, I want to suggest that the hard look needs to be directed as much inward at our own lives as it does our corporate life. I want to suggest that the starting place is with a litmus test.

I'm not a fan of litmus tests, generally, so I am a bit surprised that I have come to this conclusion. I don't like litmus tests that get bandied around at ministers- they so often begin with "well, don't you believe...?" How do you answer that? "Well, as a matter of fact, no, I don't believe..." No, I'm no fan of litmus tests because they tend to draw distinctions in places where perhaps we ought to be able to see shades of gray. I hear about them in political campaigns and sometimes in the church and most of the time when I encounter litmus tests, they are measuring acidity of a different nature. No, I'm no fan of litmus tests, but I have one for us nonetheless.

Now before I give you the litmus test, I have a few more disclaimers to cover. Here's the first disclaimer: this litmus test is for you personally. I don't want you to go applying it to your neighbor. This is your test. Apply it only to yourself.

Next, when you have applied it to yourself, I don't want to hear about any hair shirts, any mea culpas- I'm giving you a litmus test for your openness to spiritual growth, not for the purpose of making anyone feel bad. The purpose of this sermon is not to motivate a guilt-trip or give permission to point fingers.

This is an individual exercise. At best it can be a couples exercise, but I don't want you to push it much further.

Here's the test: how well can you answer the prophet Micah? If ever there were a spiritual inventory that could be taken, it is to be found in Micah's words to the Israelites: What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God?

What indeed? For a number of years, when I was right out of seminary, I went through a phase where I said that I never want to be perceived as a preacher of morality. Not because morality is not valuable- it is, but because morality changes from age to age. It's such a subjective term. So, I told myself I wanted to preach the gospel and none other because Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and tomorrow. And certainly there is value in a dogged belief that we can preach Jesus and none other, but what I came to realize is that if we are able to seek faithfully after this tripartite suggestion, we may find ourselves on a path that is more directed and focused than all the moralizing we could possibly muster. Now the reason I pursued this line of thinking was that I wanted to draw a distinction between living a life of morality and living a life of faith.

Living a life of morality does not require God. Living a life of faith does. David was no model of morality, but he was a model of faith. And I find that if we take seriously Micah's categories of justice, kindness and the humble walk with God, the demands may well be very high.

I suggest we apply Micah's test to our own lives because the context in which we move has more similarities than perhaps we might initially realize. We don't speak of ourselves as living in the midst of a pagan culture, but we certainly live in the midst of a

secular culture. The pagan culture of the ancient Canaanites included a great deal of fertility worship and ritualized and abusive sexuality- which by the way is where a great deal of the concern with human sexuality in the Bible comes from- and while we may not as a society find ourselves confronted with ritualized sexuality and pagan fertility worship, we do find ourselves confronted with a secular society and money-lust. We do find ourselves seeking to live distinctively Christian lives in a context that is as influenced by one driving value- and that is the value of stuff and acquisition and all the baggage that comes along with it as did the ancient Israelites. And just like those ancient Israelites, we struggle to find our faithful bearing in the midst of it. Micah has a word for us.

Micah's word for us is that in the midst of all the changing values of culture and morality comes the eternal value of God's word and the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and that value places a premium not on being bigger, faster, stronger, mightier and more dominating, but being more just, kind, humble and Godly. In short, what Micah is directing us toward is holiness.

Holiness is a category of living that should frighten us when we contemplate it. We speak a lot of grace and atonement in the Presbyterian Church. We should. It's important. But I said last week, and I'll repeat it now, that there is a danger that accompanies this way of thinking. And that danger is this: that we might be so concerned about being sure people know that God loves us right now, right as we are, even as we are, that we run the risk of not realizing that God is working on us. We're heavy on justification while running short on sanctification. Justification is a theological word, a Pauline term, and it means the process by which we are seen as holy in God's

sight, even though we are not. God looks at us like we're Jesus. That's a good deal. That's where the doctrine of atonement, of God's preemptive love comes from. But Sanctification....ahhhhh, well that's a different matter! Sanctification is the process by which God, by the action of the Holy Spirit within us begins to actually make us holy. That ought to scare the hell out of us. There's a wonderful quotation from Kierkegaard that captures this:

“We live our little lives with big purpose and a sense that there is more. We do this by faith. It goes against the seeming ordinariness of everything. We take a radical position when we insist that it all does matter. Life is holy ground. Holy ground is dangerous. It is the region of thundering mountains and burning bushes; it is the domain of men and women bellowing prophesy with fire in their wings and the winds of change in their voices. Holy places put you at risk more so than any other place. You feel both at risk and awed in a holy place. Life is a lot like that hilltop. We gather together to have the hell scared out of us, literally. We catch a glimpse of each other, we sense the smell of God and although we rush away from the holiest of moments, we are utterly changed. Life slams us into God and if we have any sense knocked into us, we realize that behind all the ordinary stuff there is something more dazzling and real than we can understand. Life is holy ground. Holy ground is risky.”

When we start talking about walking with God, we better begin to get a little nervous. When we start talking about humbly walking with God, we better begin to realize that God has some plans for us, and some expectations of us. We better begin to wonder what doing justice and loving kindness looks like. When open ourselves to that possibility, we better be prepared.

Holy Ground is risky. God might just ask something of us.

I believe we come here to find Holy Ground. I believe we come here because, like Kierkegaard, we do suspect there is something more. Our faith calls us into the belief that what we do does matter.

Micah speaks of walking humbly with God. Walking circumspectly, to be sure, but most importantly, walking. Following. Micah suggests that on our journey *to* God we are on a journey *with* God and he suggests that God has some ideas about how we live in that time. Doing justice. Loving kindness.

Stewardship is about more than money. Yes, this church has to put together a budget. It may surprise some of you to know that I don't know now, won't know ever what you pledge and what you give. That's between you and God. So when I speak of stewardship I want to speak not only about money, but about your whole life.

Stewardship has come to be associated with the tithe. I've studied for years how this came to be, and I think I've come to understand how this has happened, but I want you to know that this isn't a holistic understanding of stewardship. A tithe, in case you don't know, is ten percent. It represents the amount of the fruit of one's labors was expected to be given to the temple in ancient times. Jesus, you should know, doesn't really talk about tithes. For Jesus to talk about a tithe would be to let us off easy. He doesn't do that.

When Jesus talks about money, it is always in the context of our whole lives. Jesus wants you. Jesus wants *you*.

That's what stewardship is about – Jesus' dogged pursuit of us.

Jesus wants us to be doing justice and loving kindness. He talks at such length in all the gospel accounts about the kingdom of God. Do you know what the kingdom of God is

about? It's about a vision of the world where we really do treat each other like neighbors, and we really do embrace outsiders and offer hospitality to strangers. That is one of the things about this place that makes me almost sinfully proud to be your pastor. But there is more we can do.

The kingdom of God is where we really do live with an eye to the needs of all. In God's kingdom some don't acquire wealth upon wealth while others starve. In the kingdom of God, faith can't be reduced to merely a series of actions, even good actions. Faith is about a humble walk, because in the kingdom of God, justice is done and kindness is loved.

That's much harder to give than a tithe.

Ten percent looks easy by comparison with that.

Let's face up to reality. There are some folks here for whom a tithe, ten percent, isn't sacrificial, it's an undue hardship. Sometimes ten percent is too much to ask. And the other side of the coin, no pun intended, is that there are some other folks here for whom a tithe, ten percent isn't sacrificial, it's tokenism. It's crumbs. Neither represents what God is asking of us. Let's throw out the idea of the tithe and let's talk instead about giving so that it means something. Let's talk about giving so that it is part of who we are. Let's talk about giving in such a way that it is about the doing of justice and the loving of kindness. Yes, we've got to put together a budget, but wouldn't it be more life-giving to talk about that budget in terms of how we are going to help God change lives- that's doing justice. Wouldn't it be more life-giving and grace-giving to talk about that budget in terms of lessening suffering? That's loving kindness.

Now let's talk again about that matter of walking humbly with our God.

One of my favorite hymns is “Be Thou My Vision.” It has cropped up at important times in my life and even though it is a little hard to sing, I love it. And while I don’t bash hymnals generally, our current blue one did a number to the text of my favorite hymn. I’ve mostly left off griping about it, but let me tell you what I miss about the old version. I miss that wonderful line, “high king of heaven, my victory won, may I reach heaven’s joy’s, O bright heaven’s sun!” And I think I know why it got cut. Except for days like today, All Saints’, we tend to need to be reminded that Christian faith is as much about how we live as it is about how we die. But I love that image of the high king of heaven, because it puts us in our right posture as we worship. We’re the worshippers. Paul put us in the right posture when he told Timothy: Jesus Christ is King of kings and Lord of lords. It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see; to him be honor and eternal dominion. It is God who is worshipped.

We worship God as much by what we do as what we say.

You’ve heard some of what we are about here at Morningside over the past few weeks. We’ve spoken of our worship; we’ve talked about our mission. And we have heard those words in the proper posture: the posture of worship. We worship God as much by what we do as what we say. We don’t mention these things to pat ourselves on the back. I’m glad of what we do, but there is more. There will always be more. Striving for the kingdom of God demands that we always demand more of ourselves. We need to. We need to be working at growing in the life of faith. We need to be working at growing in stewardship- not so we build a bigger budget and throw more money at the world’s problems, but so that we live more faithfully with what God has given us. Stewardship

done rightly is going to live out Micah's call: Stewardship done rightly is going to be about the doing of justice and the loving of kindness. Stewardship done rightly is going to be about walking and walking and walking humbly with our God. Kierkegaard tells us when we come to that hilltop – indeed as we come to the table -seeking holiness, we are going to catch a glimpse of each other – not just now but all we have loved in every age, we are going to sense the smell of God and although we rush away from the holiest of moments, we are utterly changed. Life slams us into God and if we have any sense knocked into us, we realize that behind all the ordinary stuff there is something more dazzling and real than we can understand.

I don't want to wrap this up with a slick stewardship illustration. No amount of me telling you other folks' stewardship stories will make it real for you. That's between you and God. But remember: behind all that ordinary stuff, there is something more dazzling and real that we can ask or imagine.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.