

Requirements

Micah 6:1-8

February 2, 2020

First Presbyterian, Luling

I often get overwhelmed, with the number of things I need to accomplish in a given afternoon, day, or week. My mind will rocket around the different things, trying to make mental notes and keep track of everything. My mind does this rocketing around, day and night, when it gets especially bothersome. If I can remember it among all the mind rocketing, there is a simple solution: make myself a list.

Making a list in itself does nothing to accomplish any of the things I'm trying to keep track of, but it does allow me to stop being overwhelmed by them. It allows my mind to slow down and concentrate on one item rather than trying to remember all of the items that would be on the list, if I could just slow down enough to write them on an actual piece of paper. And writing them on a piece of paper works better for me than typing them into my computer or phone, for some reason. I don't know why, it just does.

Now there are basically two kinds of items that go on my to-do lists: things that need to get done one time and they're over, and things that need to be repeated. So for instance, one time things might include order books for our Lenten book study. Easy peasy. Just pull up the website and do it, check it off the list, and feel accomplished.

Most of the things on my list, though, keep returning. Grocery shopping. Laundry. Bulletin. Sermon. Sweep the floor. Those pesky items keep coming back, week after week. Laundry is never really done, because there's always the clothes you're wearing. Grocery shopping is never really done, because if you're like me you always forget at least one thing, and if you're like the rest of my family, you're using up the last of something while I'm at HEB, and by the time I get home, the grocery list has already started again. Floors get dirty as soon as I sweep them. You seem to expect a sermon, every week, and the thinking about next week's sermon happens even before this week's sermon is delivered.

I did a bunch of yard work this week, which is not my favorite task. I wish I could check off pull weeds, mow the backyard, and trim bushes, and not have to do them again, at least for a year. I suspect that is not going to be the case.

You may also notice that most of these repeated items on my list are more complicated tasks. Lots of them have multiple steps. Grocery shopping, for

instance, involves making its own list, going to the store, putting the groceries away once I return home. Sweep the floor is multiple rooms—they all seem to get dirty, somehow. Bulletin involves writing prayers, choosing hymns, typing it all up, and emailing it to Etta. And usually emailing Etta again with something I've forgotten or changed my mind about. She's very patient with me.

Those are two completely different kinds of lists. One list is easy: order books. Make dessert for the potluck. Pick up grandma from the airport. One list is hard: groceries, laundry, sermons, yard work. The Israelites that Micah is describing got their lists mixed up. They accomplished the easy list and tried to take credit for the hard list. God sets them, and us, straight. Let's look into what was happening.

Our passage opens with God being dissatisfied with the people. Not just dissatisfied, but disappointed. And not just disappointed, but really heart-broken over their failures. God doesn't list out what their failures are specifically, but earlier in the book, Micah has shared God's displeasure with the people, over several things: their mistreatment of the poor and powerless, ignoring that anything is wrong or unfair, and the religious authorities abusing their position and power. Micah's message is similar to many of the other prophets' messages: Isaiah, Hosea, Amos—that the people have substituted empty rituals for faithfulness to the covenant, that their rulers are self-interested and not compassionate, and that as a whole they have not remained faithful to their promise to be God's people.

But God doesn't accuse them of any of that. God doesn't lay the blame on them at all. God says, in effect, "What have I done to fail you? What have I done that you're responding in this way?" And then God reminds them, in a condensed version, of all God has done for them, delivering them from slavery and into the Promised Land. This is what God has done for the people, God has been their God. But somehow, they have failed to be God's people, and God wants to know where things went wrong.

The people's response to God's question does not reflect well on them. They want to know how they can fix this problem. What they have become accustomed to is sacrifices, but these sacrifices have lost their original meaning, and have become a bargaining chip in their eyes. We can sin, as long as we offset our sin with a sacrifice. The sacrifices were no longer a sign of their faithful and regular worship, but a measure of their unfaithfulness. So they want to know how big the sacrifice needs to be to make God happy.

They start off reasonable, with a burnt-offering, which was required by the law at times. A calf a year old, which would be a large sacrifice. Then they start exaggerating, heading toward being sarcastic. Being sarcastic toward God is almost never a good idea, by the way. They say, well maybe a sacrifice of a thousand rams would satisfy God, would make up for what God thinks we have done so wrong. Or maybe tens of thousands of rivers of oil. Do you see how they're getting ridiculous? They're saying to God, "if our sins have been sooooo big, then would one of these ridiculously large sacrifices make up for it?" They're compounding their failures by treating sacrifices so disrespectfully, by cheapening the covenant of grace that God has given them.

And then they can't seem to stop themselves and make it even worse. "Or shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" Their neighbors practiced child sacrifice. But God had very specifically forbid them from doing so. Their God would not require such a sacrifice. They're proposing breaking God's law in order to supposedly please God.

I can't imagine that their response made God feel any better, that it made them less disappointing, that it made their case in any way. They claim to want to please God with rituals that have come to mean nothing to them, rather than by changing their hearts, or returning to the covenant that God had given them generations before.

God's patience and mercy and steadfast love are infinite, and God does not lash out or return their sarcasm. God tells them, essentially, that they've gotten their lists mixed up. God says, "I don't need sacrifices that don't mean anything to you. What I need is for you to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God. That's what the covenant was about. That's what the covenant is about. That's how you fulfill the covenant. The sacrifices that the law requires are only part of living a faithful life."

Their list of sacrifices, even reasonable sacrifices without the sarcasm, was a checklist of to-do items, that they could check off and be done with and not think about again. Order books. Sacrifice a burnt offering. Check and check. Let's move on with the rest of our lives without being changed or affected by our religious beliefs at all.

God's list, however, is the kind of list that you have to check off over and over again, that recurs and returns and comes back over and over, because we never can fulfill it perfectly. Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with God. I might manage one of those things, maybe once a week, for a few minutes. Those

are big things, things that are complicated and difficult and can't be accomplished once and for all, and can't be accomplished in one step.

Justice and kindness and walking humbly with God all go together and all influence each other. If we declare too much justice, we neglect kindness. And if we practice too much kindness, it's real easy to forget about justice. And just when we might pat ourselves on the back for balancing justice and kindness, we'll realize that we aren't walking humbly with God.

It's a difficult to do list. It seems pretty simple, if you're just reading through it. But to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with God requires our whole heart and effort. Going through the motions doesn't accomplish anything. Our faith, if it is to be real and whole-hearted, has to affect our whole lives. It can't be written on a to-do list and checked off once and for all. It's an ongoing process, a never-ending humble walk with God.