

***EXILE: When Little Things Aren't (Little).***

*Micah 6:8-14, 7:2-3, 7; Luke 19:1-10*

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**HOW DO YOU MAKE THINGS RIGHT?**

How do you repair a relationship when things have sort of broken down? How do you reconnect with someone when you have gotten sideways with one another? How do you win the person over, again?

I'm never quite sure why two people "click." Often they don't have all that much in common. But there is just something about the relationship that "works."

Jack and I became buddies. He had grown up in a small town in central North Carolina. I had grown up here, there and everywhere. He was a Tarheel. I was a Yankee. He was a North Carolina fan. I was a Duke fan. He was an accountant. I was a guy who found numbers a puzzle. He was a practical, down-to-earth, "just give me the facts" kind of a guy. I was a dreamer. He was a NASCAR guy. I thought NASCAR was a waste of time -people driving in circles not getting anywhere. He read the sports pages. I was known to read a little poetry and a lot of history. You get the point.

No reason we should have become buddies. But we were. Somehow, we were comfortable with one another. When we got someplace, we'd look for one another. Make small talk.

He was the treasurer of that small church. He wrote my paycheck. Would bring it to church with him. Have it in the pocket of the short-sleeve, dress shirt he wore under his choir robe. If I didn't ask for my paycheck, Jack would take it home with him. He thought that was funny. He'd wait until I would notice I was about out of money. Which is when I would call his house and say, "Heh, did you give me my last paycheck?" He'd laugh and say, "I was wondering when you'd notice."

When things are good in a relationship you can joke around like that. You can laugh with one another -and oftentimes you can laugh *at* one another.

There was a summer afternoon when I snapped at Jack. I was tired. Feeling stretched. Young and ignorant. He asked me a question about something that had to do with the church calendar and I snapped at him. He got quiet. I'd hurt him.

And things weren't right for awhile. You could tell: things just weren't right. He and Faye would show up for worship. He kept singing in the choir. We'd shake hands. I'd try and make small talk. But things seemed forced.

So how do you make things right when things seem to have gone sideways? How do you put things back where they should be?

I thought about that.

I thought about how to repair things.

I had an idea. I thought it would be a good thing if we could find our way over to Huey's Seafood in Haw River. A little place along the highway out north of the county seat. Nothing fancy. But they had fish platters that drew people from around the Burlington area. The fish was great. Golden fried fish. They had about the best sweet tea in the whole county. They had this peppery cold slaw. They had these seasoned hush puppies that no one else

could match. They had just a hint of onion in them. Bite into one, savor every bit of it, and follow that with a long drink of ice cold sweet tea...oh, man! And they served chess pie. Which is like pecan pie without the pecans.

I had a thought. I thought things might be better between Jack and me if I would call him up, suggest we both get away some night to Haw River, eat together at Huey's, and talk ACC basketball. I was convinced that would make things right between us. Get us over the broken spot. If I could get him to sit down with me at Huey's Seafood, and we could talk basketball, and we could drink sweet tea together, we'd be okay forever.

That should do it, I told myself.

Along with the rather significant step of saying, "I'm sorry. I wish I hadn't chosen those words. Will you forgive me? Can we be okay, again?"

### **MICAH SEES THINGS AREN'T RIGHT IN JUDAH.**

Things aren't right.

The prophet Micah knows that.

The people of Judah knew that.

Look at Micah 2:1-2 (TNIV): *Woe to those who plan iniquity, to those who plot evil on their beds! At morning's light they carry it out because it is in their power to do it. They covet fields and seize them, and houses, and take them. They defraud people of their homes, they rob them of their inheritance.* People are so greedy, so focused on getting what they want, so determined to be the winner in every business deal that they lie awake at night thinking about new and creative ways to trick or take their neighbors. They write contracts they know people can't keep, they take advantage of people's naiveté or their desperate circumstances, to write mortgages or land contracts they know people can't keep. So that when they foreclose on the properties of the poor they will be even richer.

Things aren't right.

Look at Micah 2:6 and 3:6. In these verses the prophet points out that the preachers, God's representatives, are telling people whatever they want to hear. The false prophets, the big city preachers with their fancy clothes and big degrees and all their followers, are telling prophets like Micah to be quiet. (2:6) *"Do not prophesy," their prophets say. Do not prophesy about these things; disgrace will not overtake us.*

And in the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter Micah says this: *As for the prophets who lead my people astray, if you feed them they proclaim "peace,"; if you do not, they prepare to wage war against you.*

Invite them over for a steak dinner, take them to a Notre Dame football game, let them borrow your lake house for a long weekend, and God's representatives will tell you what you want to hear. Keep them happy and they'll tell you what you want to hear.

Don't give these prophets or preachers a steak dinner, don't ever share your ND football tickets, don't turn the keys of the lake house over to them, and they'll go to war against you. They'll pick on you. They'll make you miserable -out of spite.

Things aren't right.

The small town boy named Micah can see that.

Look at Micah 3:9. The leaders of the nation *despise justice*. They are, verse 11 says, taking bribes. Slip them some money. Make a campaign contribution. Fly them down to a

Caribbean Island. And they are yours. Help them along and they'll do what you want them to do.

The almighty dollar is what controls everyone's behavior, it seems, and then -Micah 3:11 says- people walk around saying "*Is not the Lord among us? No disaster will come upon us.*" They think they are special. Different than every other nation. They think they are so good that God will protect them.

But, the prophet says, Judah is going to be plowed up like a field. Jerusalem is going to become a heap of rubble.

Things aren't right.

The people have lost their way.

They've forgotten what is right.

### **EXILE TODAY.**

Which may be what you see when you look around. At what is happening in your family. Or at school. Or at work...in the business headlines. Or in politics. Things aren't right. You have the sense that we've lost our way. Somehow, at the center of this "lostness" is a broken relationship with God.

EXILE: that's the name of this series of messages.

Exile is the experience we go through when nothing seems quite right. You feel like powers beyond your control have carried you away from what is familiar and comfortable and right. Exile is the experience of looking around and noticing that too much of life seems backwards...upside-down. You want to go back to the way it was. But you don't have the power to go back...to put things back the way they were.

And if at the center of this "lostness" is a broken relationship with God, how do we begin to make that right? How do we begin to heal that relationship? What can we do... what does God want from us so things between us can be where they need to be?

Isn't this the question Micah is asking in 6:6-7? You just know people have heard what the prophet has to say and they are asking, "So what does God want from us? How do we make this right?"

*With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?*

How do you repair things?

What is going to make things right?

I had asked this as I thought about my relationship with Jack.

And Micah, along with the people of Judah, are asking the same questions about their relationship with God: What is going to make things right? What does God want from us?

They wonder if the way to please God is to offer God beautiful worship. Will God be won over if they come before him and bow down?

Worship, when it is done beautifully, is an amazing gift we can offer to God, you know? Believe it or not every week our worship planning team meets to walk through every element of every worship service. What will be said? Who will say it? What songs will come before the scripture and after the scripture? What will be projected on the screens? Where will people

stand? We want things to be beautiful. We want the words we use in worship to be beautiful. We want the songs we sing to God in worship to be beautiful. We want everything we do in worship to be so beautiful it takes God's breath away!

Is beautiful worship what God wants from us? Is that what will make things right between us?

Or does God want some extraordinary evidence of our deep devotion? If we give God the most precious and expensive thing we have to give, will things between us be right? How about a burnt offering? How about I take the money I have been saving for my child's college fund, use it all to write a check for the church or Church World Service or Habitat for Humanity or Doctors without Borders or World Vision or United Methodist Committee on Relief? That'd make things right, right? Or maybe a calf a year old...or my firstborn child?

What does God want?

What will make things right?

The answer God gives Micah to pass on to the people is found in 6:8: *He has shown all you people what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*

I've been reading and re-reading this verse all week long. And I see each element, in this list of the things God wants from us, represented by a part of the body.

Doing justice is a hands thing. God wants our hands. Engaged in doing what is right.

Loving mercy is a heart thing. God wants us to be passionately committed, wholly devoted to mercy. Not to being right, not to proving we're right and the other person, not to getting our way, but God wants us to love mercy.

Walking humbly with God is a head thing. God calls us to thoughtful living. Choosing our words and actions with an awareness of what those words and actions are doing to the world...how they impact others. Choosing our words and actions carefully, thoughtfully, so that they point people towards God and not away. Walking humbly with God, living thoughtfully, is a head thing.

Hands.

Heart.

Head.

Act justice.

Love mercy.

Walk humbly with your God.

## **DO JUSTICE.**

Act justly. That's what God wants. The New Revised Standard Bible uses the word "do." *Do justice.*

Do the right thing. Don't just think about fairness or justice. Don't just believe in doing the right thing *but do the right thing.*

God needs for me to point out something: when the Bible talks about doing justice the Bible isn't just talking about big stuff but little stuff. Doing the right thing in the little moments of life.

I've been poking around in the Bible this week. This is some God we meet in the Bible, you know?

This is a God who seems to care about little stuff.

A management consultant would tell God to stop worrying about the little stuff. A management consultant, a leadership coach, would tell God to look at the big picture. Focus on his BHAG (Big, Hairy, Audacious, Goal). Begin with the end in mind. Not to sweat the small stuff.

In the Bible we come face to face with a God who cares about the little stuff.

Take a peek at Exodus 21:33. The Bible has something to say about what happens if you are digging a hole in your backyard for a septic tank or a swimming pool, you leave the hole uncovered, and your neighbor's ox or donkey falls into it! The one who dug the hole, the Bible says, must pay the owner of the animal money for the loss of the donkey and then take the dead animal in exchange. I guess having to figure out what to do with the dead donkey or ox in your backyard is meant to encourage you to be a little more careful next time!

What kind of God goes into this kind of detail about the little stuff of life? What kind of God wants us to do justice in these kinds of small, crazy moments?

Do justice. Be fair with one another. Don't take advantage of people. Don't bend the truth. Play straight. Not just in the big moments of life but with the little moments.

Leviticus 19:9 says we shouldn't take everything we can out of our gardens or fields, but leave something for the poor and foreigners. Don't reap to the very edges of the field, God says, but leave something behind in the fields...in your vineyards...for the needy to take. What kind of a God bothers to have an opinion about how close to drive the combine to that fence row along the west side of the cornfield?

Verse 13 tells employers not to hold back the wages of a worker overnight. What kind of a God concerns himself with payroll practices? What kind of a God bothers to care whether an employer holds a day laborer's wages overnight -gaining just a little more interest on the money in the meantime?

You want me to show you a really odd verse in the Bible?

Look at Deuteronomy 22:6. You won't believe this! *If you come across a bird's nest beside the road, either in a tree or on the ground, and the mother is sitting on the young or on the eggs, do not take the mother with the young. You may take the young, but be sure to let the mother go, so that it may go well with you and you may have a long life.*

What in the world is this doing in the Bible?

Well, God is telling us to treat creation carefully. Remember not to take so much, harvest so much, that there won't be anything next season. You may take the eggs, God is saying, but leave the mother. Consume...harvest what you need...but do it with restraint. What kind of God cares about how we handle a moment when we walk along and find a bird's nest beside the road?

Do justice.

Do the right thing with the little stuff of life. Because it's how we handle the little stuff of life that shows where our heart is with God. Once we make the big decision that God will be our God, then we express that big decision by the way we handle the little stuff in life.

I wonder if the key to our future, as a people, as a nation, isn't going to be the little stuff. Look out for one another. Be honest. Don't cheat on your taxes. Show up a few minutes early to work and get started. Don't flick your cigarette butt out the window of your car when you are sitting at an intersection or blow your snow out into the street. Don't burn a pirated DVD of the new Harry Potter movie. Turn off the tv in the evening, invite your child to read a book with you, and feed them Cheerios instead of Fruit Loops in the morning. Overwhelm the stranger with kindness and hospitality. Stop harvesting so much seafood that our grandchildren will grow up in a world where salmon and tuna are only a memory. Speak up against prejudice whether that is against Muslims or gay persons or Christians or the poor or the rich.

Do justice. Don't just think about doing the right thing, but *do* the right thing!  
Hands. God wants our hands. Do justice. Act justly.

### **LOVE MERCY.**

Love mercy. That's what God wants. Love mercy.

The heart. It's a heart thing.

Be devoted to mercy the way a lover is devoted to the one loves. The word used here, according to Bible scholars, is the word *hesed*. Which means steadfast love. Which means God wants us to approach life from a posture of mercy. Every day. Every situation.

That means we choose mercy when we are figuring out what we will do, as a nation, with the illegal immigrants who live among us and wait on us in restaurants and mow our yards and shovel our snow.

That means we choose mercy when we work our way through the tough decisions in how we budget as a nation and city and state, what we cut and what we won't cut.

That means we choose mercy when we are making personnel decisions in the business we run.

That means we choose mercy when our basketball team has the opponent down by 23 with two minutes to go.

Mercy.

Not just when we feel good, when we feel like giving someone another chance, but all the time. Not just when someone we know and life has messed up, but even when it is an irritating rascal who has failed. Mercy. Every day.

Mercy.

A forgiving and generous heart.

This pleases God. This delights God.

### **WALK HUMBLY WITH GOD.**

And, finally, walk humbly with God.

Which is a head thing.

Living thoughtfully.

Living carefully.

Think about how you are living...what you are doing...saying.

Think about the kind of impact you are having on the world...on the people around you...on the environment.

The head.

I love mountains. You know that. And one of my favorite places is Rocky Mountain National Park. There are signs up there in the high alpine areas of the park. The signs warn hikers to walk carefully because the terrain is so fragile that wherever a hiker steps he can leave a mark for ten...twenty...fifty years. Step off the path, step on some wildflowers, and we can do long lasting damage.

So walk carefully.

Step carefully.

God is pleased when we live carefully...walk lightly...do as much as good in the lives of others and the least possible amount of harm.

There is another part to walking humbly with God, though. As Jesus followers we always know we have been graced. We walk with God not because we deserve to walk with God, but we walk with God because God is gracious...God has forgiven us...God has invited us into a relationship despite our foolish decisions and stunted souls.

I love the story of Zacchaeus. You know that. He is the patron saint for all of us who are vertically challenged.

His life, his choices, had closed him off from everyone else in Jericho. He had everything, but he was regarded as a selfish, little weasel. A tool of the Roman oppressors. Unclean in every possible way. Hated by his neighbors. Isolated and resented.

Jesus shows up. He is everything Zacchaeus is not. Jesus shows up in Jericho, and he says to Zacchaeus, "Come down out of that tree. You and I must spend time together at your house."

I love the fact that Jesus doesn't give the diminutive tax collector a choice: Jesus says he *must* stay with Zacchaeus. They hang out. They break bread together. And in Jewish culture when you share a meal you are announcing a friendship. Saying you will be brothers...sisters.

Jesus loves Zacchaeus as he is.

And being loved like that, loved when you don't deserve to be loved, changes everything.

I don't deserve to be loved.

There is no compelling reason why Jesus should choose me...or you.

And yet Jesus does.

How would I make that right?

I was sure that if I could get Jack over to Huey's Sea Food in Haw River, if I could get him to share some hush puppies and sweet tea, we would be okay.

We keep trying to figure out how to make things right between us and God, and it turns out God does that for us in Jesus. When we're in exile, when things are broken between us, God shows up in Jesus and says, "Come down out of your lonely tree. And let's head to Huey's."

We spend time with Jesus...and we begin doing the little things differently. It's obvious.