

Texts: Micah 6:1-8 and John 13:31-38

Date: 15<sup>th</sup> January 2022

MUC Combined Service@10 am

Theme: 'To Love Tenderly'

### **Introduction**

*"He has shown you, O mortal, 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."* – Micah 6:8

The first Sunday of January we reflected together on what it means **to walk humbly with God** and *last Sunday we reflected on what it means to act justly.*

This morning we are reflecting on what it means **to love tenderly.**

### **Let us pray...**

*Gracious God, make the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts together acceptable in your sight, for you are our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.*

The Hebrew word **hesed** is one of the hardest words to translate. It has deep and varied meaning that can hardly be conveyed by any single English word. The word appears in the Hebrew text of the Hebrew Scripture nearly 250 times. Of those 250 uses, the word is translated as 'mercy' 150 times. It is translated as 'kindness', or 'lovingkindness', about 80 times. It's important to define these terms in our attempt to understand what Micah is instructing.

It is usually rendered as 'faithfulness', 'loyalty', or 'charity', 'merciful treatment of others', or 'love tenderly' or 'kindness to those we are in a relationship with'.

It is the great description of God's faithful, kind and merciful covenant love.

*Hesed* is more accurately conveyed as 'loving-kindness'.

*Before we reflect further on what it means to love kindly or to love tenderly, I want you to remember a time when someone or some group of people was especially kind to you? Perhaps close your eyes...What happened when someone was kind to you? Who was involved? How did their act of kindness towards you change you? Take your time...And again, can you remember a time when you reached out in kindness to another? What moved you to do this act of kindness? Who was involved? How did your actions affect you and the others involved?*

*“He has shown you, O mortal, 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.” – Micah 6:8*

By placing this injunction to **“love kindness”** in the middle between **“doing justice”** and **“walking humbly”** perhaps the prophet Micah is reminding us that the nature of true kindness, always contains elements of justice, and always contains elements of humility.

Frederick Buechner<sup>1</sup> a famous theologian suggested a close linked between justice and mercy. According to him, *“Justice also does not preclude mercy. It makes mercy possible. Justice is the pitch of the roof and the structure of the walls. Mercy is the patter of rain on the roof and the life sheltered by the walls. Justice is the grammar of things. Mercy is the poetry of things.”*

To love people is one thing and to love mercy or kindness is another. Please note that here love is not a noun but a verb. We are not aiming at love but we *love* kindness and mercy. The object of love, in Micah’s case, is to pursue *hesed*. In the 17th century, Stephen Charnock explained it beautifully: *“The justice and mercy of God are united in a joint applause... An eternal marriage is made between mercy and justice; both shake hands, and not only acquiesce but rejoice, both pleased and both gratified...”*

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner (pronounced BEEK-ner) is an American writer and theologian. He is the author of thirty-nine published books and has been an important source of inspiration and learning for many readers. His work encompasses many genres, including fiction, autobiography, essays, sermons, and other nonfiction. Buechner’s books have been translated into twenty-seven languages for publication around the world. Buechner’s writing has often been praised for its ability to inspire readers to see the grace in their daily lives.

*Biblical* scholars tell us that the emphasis here is not on emotions but rather on love in action: We are to show respect, benevolence, mercy, grace, kindness, concern, generosity and faithfulness to others, not conditioning our care for them on their response.

Instead, since we have received mercy and grace and kindness from God, we are to show others the same. In short, we are asked – (you & me) “to LOVE mercy”.

In a way this is a strange demand, because it would have been expected that God’s demand would be to “show mercy”, “give mercy”, “practice mercy”. No, it is, “LOVE mercy” – “love” here refers to something for which we have affection, something seen and embraced as desirable. It is the same love God has for you and me.

Truth is if we are to be faithful to our vocation to love as Yahweh loves, we are called, not only to be tender or kind or merciful, but also to be intensely determined to do what Yahweh requires of us. The action of ‘loving mercy’ points to an attitude. To ‘Love mercy’ is to have a mindset that seeks compassion where condemnation is deserved. A mindset that ‘loves mercy’ does not rush to judgement and is not quick to condemn.

Such is the mindset of God.

In Psalm 103:8-11 we read: *“The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in mercy. He will not always strive with us, nor will He keep His anger forever. He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor punished us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward those who fear Him.”*

*“To love tenderly or kindly is to love with an awareness of the capacity of the other to be wounded, to suffer pain, and to be dependent upon relationships with others.”<sup>2</sup>*

*“To show kindness to someone means to deliver the person who is in a weaker position due to some misfortune or other, not out of a sense of reluctance, but with a spirit of generosity,*

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<sup>2</sup> Sharon Parks, ‘To Act Justly, Love Tenderly, walk Humbly’, pg 30

*grace and loyalty. Acts of justice and succour motivated by a spirit of mercy guarantee the solidity and durability of the righteous covenant.” (Waltke)*

*To love kindness is to look on the weak and vulnerable with the eyes of God’s love and give them not what they deserve, but what they need. (Phillips)*

We ‘do’ justice but we ‘love’ kindness.

*Sometimes hesed is translated as ‘steadfast love’. It combines commitment with sacrifice. Hesed is one-way love. Love without an exit strategy. When you love with hesed love, you bind yourself to the object of your love, no matter what the response is. So, if the object of your love snaps at you, you still love that person. If you’ve had an argument with your spouse in which you were slighted or not heard, you refuse to retaliate through silence or withholding your affection. Your response to the other person is entirely independent of how that person treated you. Hesed love is stubborn love.*

It’s easy to gloss over the love kindness requirement. Who doesn’t love kindness?

As Frank Burns said in M\*A\*S\*H, “It’s nice to be nice—to the nice.”

How many of you have watched M\*A\*S\*H?

Let’s think about the difference between being nice and being kind. For me kindness is often expressed through actions you take for others, while niceness typically involves more superficial words or simple gestures. A nice person may tell a neighbour they are sorry that they are sick — while a kind person may drop off some soup or offer to pick up groceries for them. I want to challenge you this week to move beyond nice. Nice is cheap. During your encounters, pause and think about what would be the kindest thing you could do in that situation.

Kindness is a whole deeper tone. To be kind, you must care about them. Niceness is pleasantries. Sometimes kindness involves things that are not so pleasant. Giving someone bad news. They need it, but not a feel-good moment. Kindness is to be helpful to them out of compassion and empathy. It is really one word loving-kindness.

Whether you are aware of not, whenever the Hebrew Scriptures talk about why God does what he does for people, once again the word *Hessed* is used. God's loving kindness, mercy, faithfulness are described as *hessed*.

What this requirement is telling us to do is to do unto others as God has done unto you.

God has been faithful to you so be faithful to those around you.

God has forgiven you — forgive those who hurt you.

God has been patient with you — display patience toward those around you.

God has not held anything back, loving you completely, passionately, — love others completely, passionately.

God has intervened for you in your time of need — show up for others in their time of need.

What does God require of you? *"He has shown you, O mortal, 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."* – Micah 6:8

Remember in Micah 6:1-8, Micah paints the scene of a courtroom in which God is the prosecutor and the people are the accused. In delivering his prophecy, Micah alternates between the roles of narrator, the people and God.

Clearly in Micah's time some Jews were not showing mercy to the poor. They exacted the letter of the law from them. They lent money to a needy person at high interest and when he could not pay back his loan in time, they took his outer garments and let him suffer from cold and nakedness (2:8). Widows who could not pay their creditors were cruelly driven out of their homes with their children (2:9). There was no compassion or pity at all for the plight of these poor and needy brethren!

While we may feel furious about those who do such things, we must examine our own hearts to see whether we are doing the same thing. Have you shown enough love and consideration for others? Have you cared enough for those who are suffering and gone out of your way to help them?

YOU AND I KNOW that our words, our actions, they are always planting seeds. But what kind of seeds are you planting? Seeds of discontent? Of judgment? Of ridicule, or hatred, or division? Or seeds of kindness? Of love and unconditional acceptance?

*John 13:34,35 <sup>34</sup> I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. <sup>35</sup> By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."*

As the second century of Christianity began to unfold, the faith had spread throughout the Roman Empire —particularly to some of its great cities, like Rome and Carthage in North Africa. At that time, Christians were the objects of great suspicion from their neighbours and government officials because they had given up the behaviours of their previously pagan lifestyle. Wild rumours had begun to circulate in some places about what Christians taught and did in their meetings together.

To clear the air and defend the good name of Christianity, a church leader in Carthage named Tertullian (a Roman pagan) wrote a brief explanation of Christian practices and a critique of the unjust accusations that had been made against them.

Here is what Tertullian wrote: *"It is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. See how they love one another, they say, for they themselves are animated by mutual hatred; how they are ready even to die for one another, they say, for they themselves will sooner put to death (The Apology, ch. 39)."*

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*To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” – Micah 6:8*

So, the answer to the Israelites’ question, “God, what do you expect from us?” comes down to just three things. God says, “Here’s what I expect.

I expect you to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with me.”

So, if you don’t remember anything else I say the rest 2023, I hope this will stick with you –  
**do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with God.**

And what is clear from Micah is this — it’s not enough for us to think about it, to talk about it, to wish it, or even to pray about it. We are to do it, and love it, and walk it.

When we do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with God, we play a role in helping to bring God’s kingdom here to this earth.

Would you bow with me in a word of prayer:

Compassionate God, we pray that you would give us a vision of our world as you want it to be. A world where the weak are protected, and none go hungry;

A world where the benefits of civilized life are shared, and everyone can enjoy them;

A world where different races and cultures live in mutual respect;

A world where peace is built with justice, and justice is guided by love.

And finally, we pray that you would give us the courage to work toward creating that kind of world,

Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.