

“Approaching Our Destination”

Old Testament Lesson: Micah 6:6-8

New Testament Lesson: Matthew 23:1-12

Elisa Morgan has become a sought after speaker and author following her long career as president of an international association providing mutual support for mothers of preschoolers; some of you many know it as MOPS. But 20 years ago, when she first took the job, she saw herself as the least likely person to head a mothering organization.

“I grew up in a broken home,” says Morgan. “My parents were divorced when I was five. My older sister, younger brother, and I were raised by my alcoholic mother. While my mother meant well — truly she did,” says Morgan, “most of my memories are of *my* ‘mothering her,’ rather than her mothering me.

“... I remember her weaving down the hall of our ranch home ..., glass of scotch in hand. She would wake me at 2 a.m. just to make sure I was asleep; I would wake her at 7 a.m. to try to get her off to work. Sure, there were good times,” says Morgan, “like Christmas and birthdays when she went all out and celebrated us as children. But even those days ended with the warped glow of alcohol. What she did right was lost in what she did wrong.”

So, when Morgan was asked to consider leading Mothers of Preschoolers International, she says she “went straight to her knees – and then to the therapist's office. She wondered, “How could God use *me*,” someone “who had never been mothered, to nurture other mothers? The answer came as I gazed into the eyes of other moms around me,” says Morgan, “and saw their needs mirroring my own. God seemed to take my deficits and make them my offering.”

In our Old Testament reading, the prophet Micah suggests several things in considering what would be a suitable offering to God – a burnt offering, a herd of rams, precious oil, your firstborn. Your baby, your own flesh and blood – what could be more precious than that?!? “He has told you, O mortal, what is good” – what it is that the Lord requires of ..., of us: “... to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with (our) God?” God calls to us on three different levels: a personal call, to do justice; a corporate call, to love kindness; and a creaturely call, to walk humbly with God.

One of the members of the Adult Mission Team that returned from the Dominican Republic last week shared with me his struggle with the enormity of need in the world compared to the abundance of excess that most of us have. Faced with such disparity, we often feel helpless to make a difference. We hear God’s call to do justice, and we wonder, “how?” I can be the most just and giving person in the world, and it still won’t change things for the thousands of Dominican mothers raising their children in dirt-floor homes, in communities with no jobs, in a country that spent most of the last 500 years under conqueror nations or political dictators while the Western world was allowed to prosper. What is a just response to such

deplorable conditions? As individuals, on a personal level, we're at a loss. What sacrifice could I make, living here in Greenville, SC, that would make a difference to all the impoverished mothers living in the DR?

Thank God we're not left to face such challenges alone. God brings us into community through our calling to love kindness and walk humbly with God. And in a community formed around loving kindness in humble service to God, we're empowered to do justice. Loving kindness and humble service. The Hebrew word for kindness – *hesed* – is especially rich in meaning. It is often translated as *mercy*, but the meaning here is really loyalty toward one another. God brings us into relationship with one another so we don't have to face the challenges of life alone; we're to work together in trusting, loyal relationships with one another. *And*, we're also brought into relationship with God. And not just any type of relationship – though there are many: We can be in awe of God, frightened by God, inspired by God, reassured by God. But here, we are called to be humbled by God.

The meaning of the word in Micah is not so much “humility” as “circumspection” – a careful, deliberate way of moving through life – thoughtfully and purposefully. I can't think of a better way to approach one's faith. This is why most people come to church, to gain such a solid footing in life. Jesus bids us “follow me,” ... “I am the way – the truth and the life.” There's a reason Jesus bids us to walk as he walks, to search him out as “THE way.” It really is a journey we're on. And our Old Testament lesson gives us the destination of our journey: justice, kindness, and a humble, purposeful relationship with God. But how do we get there from here?

In our New Testament lesson from Matthew, Jesus instructs the crowds and his disciples in how to live as his followers. He provides instruction that can take us closer to our destination as we strive to “do justice, ... love kindness, and ... walk humbly with (our) God.”

“The scribes and the Pharisees,” says Jesus, they “sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do what they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach.” Here, Jesus notes that various people have different roles in life, but he does not extend those roles to say that there are some people who “get it” (Pharisees, Rabbis, or whoever we see as religious and social leaders of our time) and others who had better just sit back and receive it (those being everyone else). He says, “... you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah.”

So if *all* are students, and if no one is an instructor, how do we grow in our faith and become better followers of Jesus? We're called to be in community with one another, AND to lead one another deeper in the faith. We are all capable of leading others, depending on where *we are*, and where the others want to go.

Yuri is wonderful at maps and directions. So I'm often following her lead when I'm behind the wheel and she's in the passenger seat – or, I'm embarrassed to say, sometimes she's on the other end of the cell phone being a flesh-and-blood GPS navigator. So, when we need to get from point A to

point B, Yuri's in the lead. But she's not always in the lead. I'm better at setting up home electronics – maybe that's true of your household as well. Mom is good at certain things, and Dad's good at others. And so it is in life. We're all called to different roles, and often we wear different hats depending on the need at the time.

Saul Bellow, in his collection of traditional Jewish stories, tells of a rabbi living in a small Jewish town in Russia. Each Friday morning, the rabbi disappears for several hours. His disciples boast that during those hours their rabbi goes up to heaven and talks to God. A stranger moves into town, and he's skeptical about all this, so he decides to check things out. He hides and watches. The rabbi gets up in the morning, says his prayers, and then dresses in peasant clothes. He grabs an axe, goes off into the woods, and cuts some firewood, which he then hauls to a shack on the outskirts of the village. There an old woman and her sick son live. He leaves them the wood – enough for a week – and then sneaks back home.

Having observed the rabbi's actions, the newcomer stays on in the village and becomes his disciple. And whenever he hears one of the villagers say, "On Friday morning our rabbi ascends all the way to heaven," the newcomer quietly adds, "If not higher." Teacher, AND servant. We are each called to fulfill various roles in life. Which role we're in depends on where we are at any given moment. We have weekend roles – maybe coaching your child's team or cleaning up the yard; and weekday roles – working in the office or the home, volunteering in the community, or attending school.

For the past three and half years, I've had the honor of serving Westminster in a pastoral role. And during that time, I've seen the roles that members of the congregation fill. But more importantly, I've seen how you approach those roles.

Jesus says that no one is to be called rabbi, or teacher, or father, or instructor; and yet some of us are teachers and instructors, and fathers or mothers, older brothers and sisters, bosses and company presidents. There's a difference between being called by a certain title, and fulfilling that role. Titles are meaningless unless the appropriate actions follow. The scribes and Pharisees held titles of authority, but failed to fulfill their roles as leaders. And Jesus responds with a three-fold reprimand. He points out how the scribes and Pharisees say all the right things, but do not do them; how they lay burdens on others, while failing to act themselves; and how, when they do act, it's for the wrong reason – how they try to exalt themselves. The scribes and Pharisees have forgotten what it is to “do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God.” They've forgotten that *how* we approach our spiritual journey is more important than reaching our destination; that you can't build up the Kingdom while tearing down the individual.

One of the things that has made Westminster such a great church to serve is how you do what you do. Westminster is a church of active faith committed to doing justice. It's a church of loving kindness, seeking to support and encourage one another. And it's a church of humble service.

This is the image of Westminster that I take with me as I go to serve as pastor at First Presbyterian Church in Independence, MO. And it is my hope that this is the image you have of yourselves, both as a church and as an individual.

God does great things through the church, by calling each of us as individuals. Regardless of the various roles we have, we share a common calling. As you listen for God's call upon your life – to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God – do you hear it as an insurmountable challenge, or as an invitation to be in community with others, offering yourself as a living sacrifice to God?

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