

“In Defense of Kindness: Justice and Advocacy”
Micah 6:6-8

In a recent news article, I read about an effort in Oregon to ban octopus farming based on emerging research that the octopus is a highly sentient, intelligent being. It is fascinating to connect moral value to beings simply because they can feel. Take, for example, Wilbur the pig from the classic children's book *Charlotte's Web*, and how he was saved from slaughter when his spider friend convinced the humans that he was "some pig" - extraordinary, radiant, and humble. In both cases, the transformation begins with a shift in our perspective, moving us to see the sacredness inherent in each being.

This is precisely the invitation of our faith when it comes to seeing others and treating them with kindness. God is the one who invites us to look beyond the rigid limits, fears, and prejudices of our lives so that we can recognize the value of every individual - both in our daily interactions and within the larger systems we create and participate in.

One of the most beautiful and enduring calls for justice in the Hebrew Scriptures is found in the words of the Prophet Micah 6:6-8:

"With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"
He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

At its heart, this scripture is a call to kindness - the practice of putting the needs and interests of another first. We sometimes think there is a disconnect between kindness and justice, viewing kindness as soft and personal, and justice as hard and systemic. In reality, they are deeply intertwined. Often, it is deep kindness that drives us to work for justice in the first place. When we genuinely connect to the struggles of others, we are moved to change the very conditions that caused them harm.

During the time of the prophet Micah, the social dynamics were strikingly similar to our own. Micah was a country prophet in the southern kingdom of ancient Israel, writing just after the fall of the northern kingdom to the Assyrian Empire. It was a period of intense uncertainty, geopolitical anxiety, and fear.

Micah provided his people with both a warning and a vision. They could live like the empire around them - enamored by the gods of money, success, and power - or they could live as agents of Yahweh, pursuing kindness, justice, and peace. Micah envisioned a day when nations would be drawn to God's ways, beating their swords into plowshares and engineering weapons of warfare no longer. When people learn to see each other through the lens of kindness, they stop violating each other's dignity.

Micah saw that the only way to fulfill God's dream was for people to match their worship with their lifestyles. The people of ancient Israel had been remarkably faithful in their temple attendance, but their economic and social systems had become corrupt, serving only the greed of the wealthy and powerful. They replaced structural righteousness - like practicing the Year of Jubilee and defending the widow - with empty rituals. They tried to substitute sacrifices on the altar for justice in the marketplace.

Micah challenged them to return to a faith that mattered on Monday morning, built on three profound steps: **Do** justice, **love** kindness, and **walk** humbly.

- **Do Justice:** God's justice is not a punitive, "tit-for-tat" system. It is *mishpat*—a holistic restoration of society where the vulnerable are protected and gaps are closed.
- **Love Kindness:** The Hebrew word used here is *hesed*—a steadfast, fierce, unfailing love. It is a covenantal commitment that refuses to let the other go.
- **Walk Humbly:** As biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann points out, biblical humility is not about self-loathing; it is the source of true wisdom. Walking humbly means keeping our minds open to God's expansive wisdom rather than operating out of our own narrow prejudices.

Following this prophetic path is how we amplify God's dream over our cultural fears. In his book *Change the World*, Mike Slaughter reminds us:

"True church growth is not about how many people attend each weekend. The true greatness of any local church is measured by how many people serve the marginalized... The business of the church is to engage and empower disciples of Jesus in meeting the needs and closing the gaps of disparities for the least of these. Religion that honors God is religion with feet."

This work always begins with a shift in perspective. In a reflection on our current cultural divisions, author Diana Butler Bass lifted up the biblical practice of hospitality as an antidote to modern vitriol. She recalled the words of Henri Nouwen, who observed:

"Our society seems to be increasingly full of fearful, defensive, aggressive people anxiously clinging to their property and inclined to look at their surrounding world with suspicion, always expecting an enemy to suddenly appear or do harm."

If that was true in the 1970s, it has only intensified today. Nouwen insisted that our primary spiritual task is to convert *hostility* into *hospitality* - to turn the enemy into a guest. When we do this, fearful strangers reveal their precious gifts, and new life is born. Hospitality is not just hosting dinner; it is a fundamental attitude toward our fellow human beings. Creating spaces of welcome in our minds and hearts transforms ordinary moments into sacred ground.

But what does this look like when kindness demands justice? What happens when hospitality refuses to remain passive?

To see this clearly, we can turn to the simple wisdom found in a beautiful children's book by Kevin Henkes, titled *Chrysanthemum*.

It is the story of a little mouse who absolutely loves her name. She thinks it is absolutely perfect—until she goes to school. There, the other children tease her. They laugh at how long it is, pointing out that it barely fits on a name tag, and mock her for being named after a common garden flower. Under the weight of their hostility, Chrysanthemum wilts. She begins to dread school, looking at her classroom with suspicion and fear, feeling completely insignificant. The turning point in the story comes through an act of systemic advocacy disguised as artistic appreciation. The music teacher, Mrs. Twinkle, notices Chrysanthemum wilting. She doesn't just pull Chrysanthemum aside and whisper a private compliment. Instead, she stands up in front of the entire class - changing the classroom's culture. Mrs. Twinkle announces that her own first name is Delphinium - also a long flower name - and that if she has a baby girl, she thinks "Chrysanthemum" is the most beautiful name she could ever choose. In that single, public act, the teacher does not just offer a fleeting moment of individual kindness. She uses her authority to shift the environment. She protects the vulnerable, redefines what is valuable, and establishes a new standard of dignity for everyone in that room. The bullying stops because a leader chose to advocate for the one who was being excluded.

This is exactly what the Prophet Micah is begging us to understand. Loving kindness (*hesed*) cannot be quiet or hidden when someone else is being crushed. Kindness that stays silent in the face of harm is not kindness at all; it is compliance. True kindness must put on shoes, walk out into the world, and *do* justice.

Like Mrs. Twinkle standing up for a lonely student, or the advocates in Oregon looking at an octopus and seeing a creature worthy of protection, we are called to look at the marginalized, the immigrant, the poor, and the forgotten, and see the sacred image of God.

We are called to alter the systems, rewrite the rules, and speak truth to power so that our world looks less like a hostile empire and more like God's kingdom. May we leave this place determined to do justice boldly, to love steadfast kindness fiercely, and to walk humbly with our God every single step of the way. Amen.