The Good Life

Gene McAfee

The Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Rite of Christian Initiation and Affirmation of Baptism

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"Yahweh has told you, 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?" – Micah 6:8

How would you define the good life?

Let's start piecing together an answer with a little help from a song made famous by Mama Cass Elliot, "Don't Let the Good Life Pass You By." Let's have a little listen, paying special attention to the lyrics.

[Stream Team plays song in the room.]

The lyrics suggest that the good life includes lying in bed and listening to the rain fall, owning a homemade apple pie, watching a

child at prayer, holding a hand to stop its trembling, helping a neighbor, or even having a good cry.

The simple things, the basic things, the fundamental things. We always seem to come back to those when we ask what the good life consists of.

And beneath those simple, ordinary, everyday gifts and gestures are foundational callings articulated for us by the prophet Micah in today's first reading: “Yahweh has told you, mortal, what is good; and what does Yahweh require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

There they are: the three fundamentals of the good life. Doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God.

Not a complicated formula for living, not a lengthy list of rules and regulations, but three ways of being in the world. And the prophet says they are good. They're good in general – that's why Micah addresses the words to the generic “Mortal.” They're good for us, and they're

good for Zoe. Together, they describe a good life, the kind of life we all want for baby Zoe.

When we baptized Zoe a little while ago, we welcomed her into a community of people who take those words as a description of the life we all want for ourselves and our loved ones, and the kind of life we are called to live: doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God.

That's a tall order for a little girl. But we believe she can grow into that life, just as we believe that all of **us** can. And that belief is what forms us into a community of faith. And that belief is also the hope that saves us from despair. Not last Tuesday's election, but doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God – those are the **true** soul savers.

We believe that none of us is born loving God above everything else and loving our neighbors as ourselves, as Jesus told us to do. But we also believe that every one of us can aspire to become such a person. We can change. We can become less self-centered, less prone

to violence in all its forms, more attentive to the needs of others, and more aware of God's presence in us and around us. We believe such change is possible, and we believe we can act according to the changes made in us by the Spirit we call Holy.

So let's consider those three big callings, beginning with justice.

We talk a lot about justice in America. We have a department dedicated to it, a center named for it downtown, and a Justice Ministry in this church, among many other manifestations of the concept. But what is justice, and will Zoe be able to practice it?

Zoe will know justice when she sees it, or, more likely, she'll recognize injustice when she experiences it. Her family will know that when they hear her wail, “That's not fair!”

And it may indeed not be fair because life isn’t. That’s an important lesson for all of us to learn sooner rather than later. Or Zoe’s wail of outrage may simply reflect that Zoe isn't getting what she wants for herself at that moment.

We often cry “Unfair!” when we don't get what we want, and that's what makes justice such a struggle. While we say we want what's fair for everyone, we actually spend much of our lives seeking fairness first for ourselves and our loved ones, and then fairness for others only as our spare time and energy permit us to pursue it.

I heard Rabbi Shai Held say in an interview not long ago that when many people say “Family first,” what they really are saying is “Family only” – tribalism in the worst sense of that word.

But biblical justice asks more of us than that. It asks us to look beyond our own interests and the interests of our loved ones and consider the circumstances of others we do not know and will never know. Biblical justice asks us to pay attention to those who are disadvantaged, overlooked, excluded, or denied the opportunities and dignity that ought to be theirs. Justice isn't simply getting what **we** think **we** deserve. It’s working toward a world in which everyone has the opportunity to live with dignity and a world in which no one's well-being is sacrificed for someone else's advantage.

But that is a world that we have to **work** for, because we are innately selfish. All of us, no exceptions. That's why Jesus told us to love our neighbors **as we love ourselves**. He knew human nature. He knew about that prior, entrenched, and seemingly unrelenting demand of the ego, which is our love of self. Jesus knew that self-seeking is congenital—we're born with it. All animals are. There is no such thing as an altruistic baby. There may indeed be some sort of altruistic gene or impulse embedded in our physicality, as some scientists are investigating, but every parent knows how much work – sheer, hard, persistent work – it takes to grow children into generous, thoughtful, non-hitting, non-biting, non-scratching human beings. And our national discourse is showing that a sad proportion of us never grow into that kind of maturity.

Where will Zoe be exposed to teachings like this if not here in the church? Kristen and Matt have made the important decision to make Zoe part of a community brought together not by shared interests, such as the Scouts or the marching band, but by a shared mission and a

shared orientation to practice justice, to love kindness, and to live with God in such a way that we acknowledge that God is in control and we are not – walking humbly with God, as Micah put it.

That's our contribution to make to the world and to Zoe. And so, as a church, we have to ask ourselves: Will we do it?

Secondly, what will it mean for Zoe to love kindness?

Zoe will love many things over the course of her lifetime. Along with mommy and daddy and grandpa and grandma and her stuffed animals and her pets, and, in time, beautiful sunsets and the persons she considers beautiful inside and out, will Zoe also be able to love an abstract concept such as kindness? How will we help form her faith so that she will grow to love Love itself?

Because that's what kindness is—a species of love. The biblical word Micah is using is *hesed,* and when Miles Coverdale translated the Bible into English in the 16th century, he took Micah's words about "loving kindness" and coined two words into a new English word, "lovingkindness," and that's how he translated the word *hesed.*

And if we think that Micah's words are a tall order for Zoe, they're an even taller order for us.

Because kindness, as Micah understands it, is more than being nice. It is more than good manners, politeness, or the occasional generous gesture. *Hesed* carries the meaning of steadfast love, steadfast mercy, and steadfast attention. It is the kind of love that doesn't disappear when circumstances become difficult or when the person we're trying to be kind to becomes unpleasant or needy.

There is a difference between doing a kind thing and loving kindness. We can do a kind thing because the occasion calls for it, because someone asks us to, or because it makes us feel good about ourselves.

But to love kindness is to make compassion a way of life even when it's inconvenient, difficult, or painful. To love kindness is to develop a disposition toward other people that makes us more likely to **respond** to their needs than to dismiss them, more likely to **extend mercy** than to **render judgment**, and more likely to **seek reconciliation**

than to **nurse a grievance**. To love kindness is to develop, train, and practice a disposition of the heart that becomes a pattern of behavior. [same for joy]

That's the kind of love that shaped the life of Ruth of Moab, whose steadfast loyalty to Naomi became one of the great expressions of faithfulness in the biblical story, and that's the kind of love that has been so painfully missing from our politics, our civic discourse, and our online conversations for far too long.

We believe we're up to the kindness challenge. The church is in the God business, and God is as abstract a concept as human beings have ever come up with. We keep trying to whittle God down so that God will fit into one of our mortal-sized boxes, but God defies all our efforts at domestication. That's the stinger in Jesus' lovely words about God's kindness, "God makes [the] sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust." God's kindness will not be distributed to those **we** think deserve it. As the familiar hymn puts it,

“There’s a wideness in God’s mercy like the wideness of the sea.” We can never finally get our arms around that wideness or that kindness.

God’s kindness, the kind of love Micah describes, will not be domesticated. If we let it, however, **it can domesticate us**. It can change the way we see people, the way we respond to suffering, and the way we understand our obligations to one another.

And finally, there's that third injunction: to walk humbly with God. Will we join Matt and Kristen and the rest of Zoe's family in the all-important task of helping Zoe develop a life-defining relationship with the life-giving God, a relationship that acknowledges God's sovereignty and faithfulness to all of creation? Isn't that what it means to be humble?

Humility is less about knowing our place and more about recognizing whose world we inhabit. Walking humbly with God is an ongoing relationship, not an exercise in self-deprecation. To be humble is not to think poorly of ourselves, or to deny our gifts and abilities, but to relinquish our pretensions to being the center of things. We are part

of something immeasurably larger than ourselves, and that should be a source of great joy.

“That is happiness,” Willa Cather wrote in *My Ántonia,* “to be dissolved into something complete and great.”

And notice that Micah doesn't tell us simply to *believe* in God, or to *worship* God, or even to *obey* God. Micah tells us to *walk* with God. There's movement in that word. There's companionship, direction, purpose, and a journey that continues over a lifetime.

Walking with God means paying attention to where God is leading us, even when the destination isn't entirely clear. Walking with God means paying attention to the journey itself. Walking with God means being willing to have our assumptions challenged and our priorities rearranged. It means recognizing that we don't have all the answers, that we don't control the outcome, and that we have much to learn about the world God has made and loves.

And walking humbly with God means understanding that justice and kindness aren't separate from our relationship with God. They are

ways of living out that relationship. We cannot walk humbly with God while walking arrogantly or indifferently past the joys, sorrows, or suffering of our neighbors.

How will we help Zoe find her place among all those other infinitely precious goods of God's creation? How will we help her discover that she belongs to God, that she belongs to this world, that she now belongs to the church, and that her life is connected to the lives of all others, no exceptions?

By walking with her. By being right beside her as she takes her first steps on her faith journey. By showing her what it looks like to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God. Not perfectly, because none of us can do that, but we can show her the Christian life honestly, persistently, and with enough humility to acknowledge when we get it wrong and enough faith to try again.

And that brings us back to baptism.

This morning we have done more than welcome a child into the church. We have made promises. We have promised to help Zoe grow

in faith, to surround her with love and encouragement, and to teach her by word **and example** what it means to follow Jesus into the community of the blessed that he described in his famous sermon.

Those promises – and those blessings – are not incidental to baptism. They are at the heart of it.

We want a good life for Zoe, and both the prophet Micah and rabbi Jesus have told us what the good life looks like. It has nothing to do with getting into just the right college, finding just the right partner, or living in just the right ZIP code. Those things have their place, but they are not the foundation of a good life. The foundation upon which every good life is built is doing justice, loving kindness, and maintaining a right relationship with God—living, in other words, a blessed life.

So if we want Zoe to have a good life—a blessed life – let's help her build her life on those foundations with how we live as well as how we speak. Let’s do more than simply “talk Christian.” Let's make sure Zoe sees **justice practiced**, **kindness loved**, and **humility lived out** in this faith community inside and outside these walls. Let's make sure she

hears us talking the talk on Sundays and walking the walk Monday through Saturday. Let’s make sure she knows that the foundations of the Christian faith aren't simply things we talk about on Sunday mornings but commitments that shape what we do the other six days of the week.

We are not simply wishing Zoe a good life; we are promising, today, in this service, to show her what a good life looks like. And who knows? In the process, we may find ourselves living that good life a little more fully ourselves.