

“Loving Kindness”
February 1, 2026
Scripture: Micah 6:1-8; Matthew 5:1-12

You know, in many ways, maybe some of the most important ways, ancient people, the people to whom prophets like Micah wrote, are really not that much different from us. We can imagine a huge gulf between us and them and think that because they didn't have the same scientific understanding of the world that they didn't possess the same intellect as we do. But in reality they were no less sophisticated than we are. They certainly weren't less moral. We can point to all kinds of barbaric behavior among people of the past, but nothing really compares to the atrocities committed by modern people.

We have always struggled with how to treat other groups that are different from us. We may dress it up in more diplomatic language today than people in the past did, but it's really the same bigotry and injustice that motivates us. This is a central point of friction in scripture. Humans tend to distrust their neighbors who are different from them, and will resort to violence to protect themselves at the drop of a hat. One scholar, John Dominic Crossan, in his book *How to Read the Bible and Still Be a Christian*, argues that the Bible is written largely to counter our violent tendencies. God calls the people away from increased violence and toward compassion for their enemies.

We can hear that concern being echoed in Micah's words. In this reading God is holding a trial with Israel on the stand. The people are asked what God has done to them to make them behave so badly. In light of God's disappointment, the prophet gives the people's typical response: more burnt offerings, more rivers of oil, sacrificing their first-born. All these grand gestures of piety born of violence. But God wants none of it. Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with God. That's all. No more violence, no more sacrifices. Just treat each other fairly. Stop trying to hurt your neighbor. Give up your arrogance and show a little humility.

I think of the three of those requirements the hardest for us is loving kindness. Doing justice is really just following the rules. Lately we've been having a little trouble with that in our country. For some reason our elected leaders don't think the rules should apply to them. But that can be corrected, and there are mechanisms to do it. Justice is a system that doesn't require that we like it, only that we follow it. And walking humbly with God is a pretty subjective condition. It's very interior, between us and God, and not really a topic for debate.

Loving kindness, though, is harder. It's not enough to begrudgingly extend kindness to another; we're called to love kindness. That means we find fulfillment in reaching out to those around us who are vulnerable or attacked and embrace them. What does that look like in the real world? I remember years ago there was a controversy in a community in Wisconsin or Missouri or someplace when an atheist organization protested the presence of a nativity in a public park at Christmas time. A group of Christians went as counter-protestors and a bit of a melee broke out. A friend of mine at the time said the Christian folks should have gone there with doughnuts and hot chocolate for the atheist group instead of a bunch of them trying to shout them down or hurl snowballs at them.

We can express our love of kindness in simple gestures of goodwill toward people we disagree with. A confrontation fraught with potential for violence can be entirely disarmed through an act of kindness genuinely offered. Last Saturday in Minneapolis an ICU nurse named Alex Pretti tried to offer kindness to a woman who was shoved roughly to the ground by a Border Patrol agent. Alex was met with violence for that attempt and was killed in the street by those agents. Loving kindness is risky in places where violence seems to be the only acceptable response.

Yet we learn from scripture over and over that meeting violence with violence is never pleasing to God. In Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel, that begins with the Beatitudes, he offers a new interpretation of Torah. This isn't meant to replace Jewish law and ethics. He's expanding on them as every rabbi and prophet does. In these words, Jesus redefines what it means to be favored, to be blessed.

What he lists, though, goes against the grain of popular beliefs. For instance, being "poor in spirit" sounds like a condition we'd all like to avoid. Don't we want to be rich in spirit, always attentive to God's voice, always aware of God's presence? The reality is that's not a condition most of us can sustain. Our spirits get low; they get depleted. When I read and see what's happening in our country and in others around the world, I have trouble keeping my spirit up. The fact is it's depressing to see things decline through bigotry and hatred in our society. What Jesus is offering in those moments, that for many of us occur more often than we like to admit, is when our spirits are poor we're left with nothing but God's presence to sustain us. We're more open to the kingdom of heaven in those moments than we are at any other time. In the psalms we find the claim, "The Lord is near the broken-hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit." I think that's what Jesus is saying; it's when we're at our lowest that we are closest to God.

It's at those times that our love of kindness is really tested. When we see others mistreated or are mistreated ourselves, we have a natural desire to lash out, to escalate the violence. We may do that because we're hurt and are mourning or we feel powerless and meek or we are so desperate for righteousness, hungering and thirsting for it. In those times it's hard not to resort to violence, not to wish the worst on those who are against us. But if we can love kindness even in those moments, if we can remain merciful, pure in heart, and be peacemakers, then we can stop the cycle of violence and reveal God's kingdom in the world.

At least that's what Jesus and prophets like Micah counsel. But it's not easy to do. If it were it wouldn't be repeated over and over in the Bible. And we've seen what happens sometimes when people act on kindness. Jesus isn't naïve about that either. He knows there's a risk to loving kindness. He knows that when we seek to live by the Beatitudes the world lashes out: "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake...Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account." When we act on our love of kindness in a hostile setting, we will not be welcomed or praised.

I know that sounds like I'm telling you not to do it. But I don't mean to. In spite of the risks, loving kindness is always better than the alternative, better than giving in to our impulses

and debasing ourselves through violence and hate. So much of scripture is calling us to live up to our ideals and values. When Micah tells the people, “He has told you, O mortal, what is good,” he’s calling them to remember who they are. Because they are God’s own children, God’s chosen, they have an identity to project in the world. And when they do that faithfully, even when it’s hard, maybe especially when it’s hard, God’s presence will be known through them.

That seems to lie at the heart of Jesus’ message. Because we are made in God’s image, we are created for kindness; we are made for justice. That’s expressed through the Beatitudes, but it’s also what motivates the commandments to love God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind, and your neighbor as yourself. Loving kindness is the core of our being, and when we refuse to love kindness, when we lash out in anger or hatred, we deny our true selves. We cut ourselves off from the presence of God and descend into violence and death.

As we hear from Micah, God is desperate to not let that happen. God offers life and healing if we’re willing to risk the world’s rejection. Right now, in our country we have leaders who want nothing more than for citizens to lash out at authorities with violence so they can justify escalating authoritarian control. We cannot give in to that. We can’t ignore or accept injustice and cruelty, but when we stand for justice we must not abandon kindness. Jesus calls us not to be dragged down into hatred but to rejoice and be glad. As Booker T. Washington once said, “Let no man pull you so low as to make you hate him.” There is no strength in violence, no matter how eager our government might be to use it. It exposes the weakness of their cause. Real strength lies in loving kindness. Real strength lies in living up to God’s image in us, in being who we’re truly created to be.

So, do justice, love kindness, be merciful, be peacemakers, and let God’s kingdom be revealed in a world in mourning, a world hungering and thirsting for righteousness. God has told us what is good; do that and live.

Amen