



Rev. Bill Roth
Micah 6:6-8
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Let us pray. Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be always, and in every way, acceptable unto thee our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

On July 16, 1983, on a very hot and humid day, Linda and I said our wedding vows to each other at First United Methodist Church in Lexington, N.C. What I remember most about that day, besides the stifling heat, was the wedding service itself, which I had labored over for many, many weeks. After all, I had just graduated from seminary that spring, and I had had a couple of Will Willimon worship classes under my belt, and I now knew what correct worship was. I knew it when I saw it and I wasn't sure I was going to see it there at Linda's church in Lexington. Since the pastor had graduated from seminary, the wedding service had changed. The presentation of the bride had been removed. The antiquated language had been updated. The sexist liturgy was all changed around. In place of the presentation of the bride, there was something called *The Blessings of the Families and the Congregation*, and I was more than eager to enlighten the local pastor there and Linda's uncle, who was conducting the worship service, on my newfound knowledge of correct worship. Right with the orthodoxy, I forbade Linda's dad to say any words when he walked her down the aisle. It was not in the rite. I wrote the homily for our wedding service to be sure that the theology would be correct. I arranged for the whole wedding party to come marching down the aisle, pastors and everyone, but alas, the two ministers grew weary of me. They politely refused to process. They said they had their own homily, thank you very much, and, come to think of it, they never did offer me any premarital counseling. Looking back, I wonder what Linda's folks were thinking that day, probably the same thing they are still thinking. Is there anything worse than a person who is fresh out of college or graduate school or seminary? A person who has been educated a little bit and has all the right answers, but none of the flexibility. I had the flexibility of a steel crowbar that day. Looking back, I'm embarrassed. I wish somebody had knocked me upside the head and told me to get over myself. Let me ask, do you think God was impressed by my correct form in planning the worship for my wedding? *With what shall I come before the Lord?*

Recently, I read parts of a new biography about Charles Darwin entitled *Charles Darwin's Sacred Cause*, how hatred of slavery shaped Darwin's view of human evolution. It's interesting in its thesis. The book postulates that based on some new evidence, Darwin was an abolitionist, as was his wife and both their families. It seems he had a sacred cause, if you will. That is, he set out to prove that the races were not separate species after all. This was contrary to what many scientists of the day wanted to believe. Most scientists hoped to prove that the races were entirely different and, thus, they could support the brutal treatment of African Americans. However, Darwin wanted to show that slavery was wrong because African Americans were not "others," they were rather "our brothers."

What do you think most conservative Bible-believing Christians think of when they think of the work of Charles Darwin? Right. They think about how his research called into question their long-held cherished doctrines about the creation of the world and humanity. Let me ask, do

you think God was more concerned about protecting the prevailing Biblical views on the creation of humankind and the world, or do you think God was more concerned about man's inhumanity to man? *With what shall I come before the Lord?*

Yesterday, when you were running off to Trader Joe's or mowing your grass, I went to a young woman's home to offer a blessing and a prayer for her condominium. It seems that a young boarder who had been living in the ground floor of her condominium had recently lost her job in the downturn of the economy. Shortly thereafter, her car had been repossessed. Ashamed and unable to cry out for help or to see her way clear, she took her own life in an act of painful despair and desperation, so I had been asked. Would I come and bring a blessing for the home? Could I come and say some prayers for this young woman who had taken her life? I don't know what you know about the book of worship, but there's no service of blessing in The United Methodist Book of Worship for homes where someone has committed suicide. But guess what? We had a prayer, we had a blessing. I made one up and did a pretty good job, even if I say so myself. You see, I've come a long way since seminary and my wedding day. I've recovered from my theological education, if you will. I've gotten over my orthodoxy. More to the point, I've gotten over myself, some of my religious beliefs and notions about how the faith should go.

Let me ask, do you really think that God cares more about our beliefs, things like the Virgin Birth? Or does God care more about our ability to hear and to see the pain in a young woman's heart? *With what should I come before the Lord?*

A couple of weeks ago, I was driving to church in the morning and I was stopped at the light on Randolph Road. It seems like I'm always stopped at the light on Randolph Road. I can never make a left-hand turn coming down Randolph from Matthews. So, I'm sitting there at the turn lane waiting for the light to change. I look over in the lane beside me and there's a car that has a bumper sticker – that's a hobby of mine, reading bumper stickers – what else do you do in traffic in Charlotte but read bumper stickers? So I look and there it is. It says this: *Jesus called. He wants his religion back.* Jesus called. He wants his religion back. One only needs to casually read the newspaper to discover why Jesus might, indeed, want his religion back. Just a few days ago, George Tiller, the 67-year-old Wichita, Kansas, doctor who was a national lightning rod in the debate over abortion, was shot to death as he walked into the 10:00 a.m. service at his Reformed Lutheran Church. Let me ask, do you think this self-righteous act done on God's behalf and based on someone's Christian beliefs ultimately impressed God? Does God really value our adherence to a compassionless orthodoxy, or would God rather we love our enemies? *With what shall I come before the Lord?*

Is it just me, or does it seem that people, the more they organize their lives around the teachings of Jesus vs. the person of Jesus, the more likely they are to become defensive, prickly and dogmatic in their beliefs? From such recent events, one could easily guess that the Christian faith needs to be rescued, but not from atheists and agnostics, but rather from rigid Bible-believing defenders of the faith. The Madeline O'Hairs of the world could only dream of inflicting such damage to the Christian faith. Do you see where we are going this morning?

We have for us today the Magna Carta of Biblical text so well read today. It's the high point of all the prophetic literature. Micah is asking us the ultimate question *What does God*

expect from us? And then having set us up with this wonderful, ultimate question, Micah then asked another question. He asked, *Do you really think that God is impressed with your sacrifice? Does God care about your orthodox religious worship?* Micah is asking his people, *Does God care more about orthodoxy, right belief, or does God care more about orthopraxy, right practice?* That's an interesting question, isn't it? It's a question for us today. You see, for centuries, orthodoxy has been a preoccupation with the Christian church. It stems from our early churches' attempt to deal with heresy... Now I've got no problems with creeds, but I also must admit that creeds don't want to make me run through a brick wall for God. You see, I'm not a Christian today because we have some great creeds. I'm a Christian today because someone from a rural church in Indiana with horribly bad theology offered me God's love, God's grace and God's mercy when I deserved none of it. I can't help but wonder if all the early churches' emphasis on right belief has obscured our Christian tradition today, specifically by emphasizing right belief over right practice. I wonder if Christians have lost, or maybe more accurately, I wonder if we never acquired a robust notion of Christian practice. Let me illustrate. Most of us here today would not understand what it means to be an observant Christian... It's understood as belief, isn't it? We tend to talk about someone as being a believer or not a believer. And yet, this makes Christianity an odd duck when it comes to the world religions. For example, being an observant Jew who practices a faith is totally comprehensible, but being an observant Christian sounds strange to our ear. And let me tell you, I think it shows.

What am I telling you today? I'm not suggesting that beliefs or orthodoxy do not matter. I love the church. There's no place in the world I'd rather be. There's no place out there that's telling us that we are God's children, no place telling us about loving one another and how to serve each other. You don't hear that message from General Motors. All you hear is *Please buy a car*. I love our church, I love the church, but what I am suggesting is that most of us Christians have an anemic vision of Christianity. For many of us, our faith is more about holding on, holding dear to those cherished beliefs vs. loving mercy and loving justice. And the prophet Micah is reminding us how simple our faith really is and yet how easy it is to take our eye off the ball and de-emphasize Christian practice.

I have a favorite story. Some of you have heard it but I want to repeat it. I love this story. It's a story about a woman who asked a wise teacher, *Teacher, which is the true religion?* The teacher replied, *Once there was a magic ring that gave its bearers the gift of grace and kindness and humility*. When the owner of the ring was on his deathbed, each of his three sons came separately to his deathbed there and they asked, *Father may I have the ring?* And the old man promised each one of his three sons that they could have the ring. And when they left his bedside, he sent for the finest jeweler in all the land and he paid to make two more gold rings identical to the original ring, and the jeweler went and he did so. And before he died, the father summoned each of his three sons into his bedroom and he gave each son a ring without telling the other sons what he had done. Time passed and the father died and, inevitably, the three sons discovered, to their surprise, that each one of them had a ring. So, they appeared before a local judge to ask his help in deciding who had the magic ring. The judge took the rings and examined all three of them and could not tell them apart, so he appeared before the brothers and said, *Why must anyone decide now? We shall know who has the magic rings when we observe the direction your life takes*. Each of the brothers then acted as if he had the magic ring. They went forth and lived with kindness, with honesty, with generosity. The teacher concluded, *The*

religions are like the three brothers in the story. The moment their members cease striving for justice and love, we will know that the religion is not the one that God gave the world. Let me repeat, the moment we stop striving for justice and love, others will know their faith is not the faith that God gave the world. With what shall I come before the Lord?

Let me suggest that God wants you to come before him in such a way that your form of worship is to be the eyes of the blind, to be the feet of the lame, to be the ears that can hear, yes, hear even the silent cries of a young woman's pain. In short, I believe that God wants you to love others above your creeds and above even your favorite passage of Scripture. God wants us to value people over our silly and often rigid theological perspectives. Perhaps, just perhaps, he wants all of us to love our religion less and love our fellow human beings more.

Hear the good news this morning. You already know more theology than you can practice and at the end of the day, there is no theological exam, but you will simply be asked, *Did you love enough? Did you love enough to act with justice and mercy? Did you care enough to give yourselves over to walk humbly in God's way? What does God require of thee? With what shall I come before the Lord? Bring him love, bring him justice, and bring him mercy.*

Amen.