

November 5, 2023: A Pastoral Message by Pastor Margaret Keyser

~ Twenty Third Sunday after Pentecost~

“What does the Lord require of us?”

Our services can be found on our website at www.barrechurch.com

Scripture Reading: Matthew 23 v 1-12 and Micah 6 v 8

1. Introduction:

There are many things we are required to do in this life. We must pay our taxes, we need a driver's license to drive a car, we must stop at stop signs, and so forth. The list can be long, and it is difficult to follow these rules and regulations, but they regulate life, for the sake of everyone. There are times when we do not adhere to these rules, and it can lead to chaos and sometimes tyranny in extreme cases. We know that to live a life of peace and quiet and joyfulness, we all need to do our part to make this peaceful life possible. In our day, it sometimes feels as if we never had any evidence of someone teaching us what it means to love one another and to live a life of goodness. Our passage this morning is a reminder of the values that God is requiring from us to bring us that good life.

2. Introduction:

We are aware that during Jesus' earthly ministry and teaching, He was quite critical of the Pharisees and Scribes for their staunch following of the Old Testament laws and yet, He would counsel His disciples and the crowds, to listen to what these religious leaders were teaching, but not to do what they did. These leaders were very good at expecting the people to obey such heavy-handed laws but did not help them cope with the expectations of it. It was difficult to live under these laws, and it was hard. Instead, we see Jesus telling His disciples in Matthew 11 v 30 that His yoke is light, and requires something completely different, that would be transformative and upbuilding, rather than burdensome and difficult to follow.

Here in Matthew 23 Jesus criticizes them for their way of life which has more to do with pleasing people in worship services, but also during social events. Their clothing and attitudes reveal how they were consumed about being recognized by others. One example of that was the wearing of their phylacteries, which were small leather cases worn around their heads and arms.

These leather cases contained texts from the Torah, which was an indication of how they followed the law to the letter. Jesus is criticizing them for that, saying they make these cases even broader to be more visible to others. They focus on all these external things, He says, but neglect what is more important in the law, in verse 23, which is as follows, “Justice, mercy and faithfulness.” These are the important things they need to aspire to and live out. These are the things that need to be written in front of their heads and carried in their hearts. And these are the values that the Prophet Micah in the late 8th century before Christ, was talking about in Micah Chapter 6 v 8, when he asked this question, “What does the Lord require from you?” The answer was, “To do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God.” Right before this, he says, “God has shown you what is good.” From the beginning of time, and throughout the history of God’s journey with the Israelites, God has shown them what is good, through so many interventions to save them, to feed them and to provide them water when they were thirsty. They were given prophets and judges guiding them and intervening for them with God. All of these and more are captured in this statement, God has shown you what is good.

3. God’s Justice, mercy and humility

The Hebrew word for what God requires, is *darash*, and it means to seek, to be intent and not settle for a lack of these important aspects in our lives. To do justice, mercy and to walk humbly with your God is not a checklist of laws that needed to be followed. It is, instead, a way of life. To act justly, means that one would look at all others as people who need to be treated in the way God would treat them, meaning they deserve equal and fair treatment. The Hebrew word for justice, means to do what God requires through the laws of Moses which captures the heart of God for the people of God, to live a life of goodness. God’s commandments are commandments of the heart, not the head. Change of heart will be expressed in tender love, mercy, and good ways and actions towards other people. To feel tender towards others requires a kind of inner humble transformation that sees the other as someone who needs the highest level of care. James C. Howell in his book on Micah, refers to the Psalmist in Psalm 131 v 1-2 as the posture of God in this moving prayer,

“O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a quieted child with its mother.”

4. Conclusion:

What then does God require from us today? To do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God. This is not a requirement that only belongs to the period of the prophets. No, it transitioned into the New Testament period with Christ ushering in the time of love and mercy and kindness and humility that is different from a legalistic way of life. It is a life of inner transformation, providing us with everything we need to live in a way that is good in the eyes of God. To love God and love one another. This is an intimate way of life that does not build walls between and amongst people, that does not harm, but protect, that does not hate, hurt, or reject. It does not seek violence and war but seeks peace and unity that pleases the heart of God and makes life on earth enjoyable and peaceful and kind and all those things we cherish.

May God help us all to answer this question from Micah, and from Christ, with an eager response, yes Lord, we will love You and love our neighbor as ourselves. Amen.