

"AUTHENTIC RELIGION"

May 6, 1990

TEXT: Micah 6:8 "He has showed you, O man, 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?"

As I said a few minutes ago, today is a very special day in the life of this church. For two years now, the young men and women whom we have just confirmed took part in our Covenant Class. During that time they learned a great many things about God, about the church, and about themselves. And this morning they take their place with the rest of us as members of this congregation. As they do, I would like to share with them --and with you all-- some thoughts about "Authentic Religion."

The late William Temple, when Archbishop of Canterbury, used to tell about the morning in a house where he was a guest, when he heard a voice from the kitchen lustily singing Sarah Adams' wonderful hymn, "Nearer My God to Thee." He complimented his host on the piety of the maid who went about her morning tasks in such a manner.

"Oh, yes," replied his host. "That's the hymn she boils eggs to --three verses for soft boiled and five verses for hard." What a let-down it must have been for the Archbishop. He thought she was singing her faith when all she was doing was timing eggs.

Of course, that doesn't necessarily mean anything. Perhaps her faith was all that one might ask it to be. But the fact remains that, for some, religion is a thing to be used for their own benefit. Jesus warned us against that when he said, "And when you pray you must not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen of men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." (Matthew 6:5-6)

And Micah, too, knew about superficial faith. He knew that a man might offer burnt offerings to God without really worshiping in his heart. He said "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 first-born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"

Then, in one of the truly great passages of scripture, he answers his own question with these words: "He has showed you, O Man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God?" That, say Micah, is authentic religion. And it sounds beautiful. It is quoted again and again, but it is not as easy as it sounds.

What does it mean, for instance, to do justice. Well, the first thing to note is the verb, "do." It does not say to admire justice, but to do it. And that is a whole different thing. Some of you may have seen the movie, Out of Africa. It was based on a book written by Baroness Isak Dinesen, who lived for many years on a farm in Nairobi. She told about a young Kikuyu named Kitau who became her houseboy. "After three months," she wrote, "he asked me one day to give him a letter of recommendation to my old friend Sheik Ali Ben Salim. I did not want Kitau to leave just when he had learned the routine of the house, and I said that I would raise his pay.

"'No,' he said, he was not leaving to get any higher pay, but that he had made up his mind that he would either become a Christian or a Mohommedan, only he did not know which yet. For this reason he had come and worked with me for three months in my house to see the ways and habits of the Christians. From me he would go for three months to Sheik Ali in Mombassa, and study the ways and habits of the Mohammedans. Then he would decide."

"My Heavens," exclaimed the Baroness as she contemplated all her obvious imperfections. "Why didn't you tell me?" I think most of us can sympathize with her. Suppose a stranger came into your house to live for three months --to work as a maid or a houseboy? After that time, what would he or she think about your religion? Would it seem authentic or not? It would depend on whether or not you had been doing justice.

Justice, you see, is not just something dispensed in courts of law. It is the way we treat each other every day --in our homes, in our schools, in our places of business. Justice means seeing to it that no one gets less from us than he or she deserves. And real religion, authentic religion, means doing justice, not only when someone is watching, but all the time.

Still, justice alone is not enough. Some time ago I read about an elderly woman who had gone to a photographer to have a formal portrait taken. When she saw the proofs she was somewhat less than satisfied. "Do you really think these pictures do me justice?" she asked rather coyly.

"Madam," replied the photographer. "You don't want justice. You want mercy." Well, don't we all? So Micah did not stop with justice, as important as that is. He said, "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness . . . ."

And that is just another word for mercy. If justice is making sure that we never give anyone less than they deserve, kindness is giving them more than they have any right to expect.

Once again the words of Jesus come to mind. He said, ". . . If any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if anyone would sue you and take your cloak, let him have your coat as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to him who begs from you and do not refuse him who would borrow from you.

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and send rain on the just and on the unjust." (Matthew 5:39-45)

If we do for others only what they deserve, we are not doing enough. God calls us to do for them, not what we think they would do unto us, but what we would like them to do. We call it the Golden Rule. Micah called it kindness. Either way it is part of real religion. The kind Christ taught, and the kind Christ lived.

The problem is, it is not easy. It is hard enough for us to do justice. It can be almost impossible to love kindness, especially if you define it the way Jesus did. But Micah did not stop there either. He said, "He has shown you, O Man 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?"

That is the part that makes everything else possible. Perhaps you have heard the slogan of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes: "God first, others second, self third." But it has to be in that order. Only when we have developed the habit of walking with God can we find the strength or the courage to put others first.

Jesus knew that what he asked us to do was unnatural. The natural thing is to put one's self first. Before others and, yes, even before God. No doubt, that is why so many people do it. It is probably why some years ago the best selling book in the whole country week after week was a book called, Looking Out for Number One.

But Jesus knew that "natural" was not good enough. He said, "Do not lay up for yourself treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven . . . ." "He has shown you, O Man 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?"