

SLD 02.06.05 preaching text from last week due to ice storm
Micah 6: 1-8
Emory Presbyterian Church
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“An Elemental Faith”

Rabbi Marc Gellman is the author of a number of popular books aimed at children, although intentionally designed, I think, for their parents to overhear. One of my personal favorites is a brief paperback entitled Always Wear Clean Underwear.¹ Always Wear Clean Underwear , subtitled “And other ways parents say ‘I love you,’” tackles from a kid’s point of view a variety of ethical issues that draw directly from what Gellman labels ‘the List.’

‘The List’ is comprised of all those things all parents tell all children through all time, like ‘take out the garbage,’ ‘stand up straight,’ ‘clean your plate,’ ‘don’t hit,’ ‘share your toys,’ ‘say please and thank you,’ and, of course, ‘always wear clean underwear.’ Despite the fact that nobody sends The List to parents, nor gives it to them in the hospital when they bring you home, nor do they read it in a book or see it on television or hear it on the radio, still, Gellman points out, every parent knows The List. Your grandparents heard The List and the children of your children will hear The List because...The List is forever.

And the reason why, asserts Gellman, is that everything your parents nag you about has both a little meaning *and* a big meaning. And when you figure what the big meaning is, you’ll become a better person. To grow up, he says, you just have to be fed and watered and kept out of the rain and cold. But to grow up *good*, you have to learn the big meanings of The List. So every chapter of Always Wear Clean Underwear is

¹ Gellman, Marc, Always Wear Clean Underwear, Harper Trophy, New York, NY, 1997.

dedicated to exploring the little and big meanings of different annoying parental demands on the list.

Take always wearing clean underwear. If you ever ask parents why that's so important, they're likely to offer a couple of sort of dumb little-meaning-type answers like 'dirty underwear is full of germs and we don't want those germs jumping off your underwear and on to you.' Or, 'you should always wear clean underwear because if you get in a car accident and the ambulance has to take you to the hospital and the doctors see you're wearing dirty underwear.... But really, have you ever heard of doctors in any emergency room saying, "We'd like to help this kid, but we just can't – he's wearing dirty underwear.'

No, those aren't the only reasons behind why parents care so much about clean underwear. The big reason is much more important, and this is what it is: The big reason for wearing clean underwear is to teach us that *what people don't see about us should be just as good as what people do see about us*. I mean, we all try to look good on the outside. But the hard part, Gellman maintains, is to look good on the inside. Hence the parental obsession with clean underwear.

Or consider that universal summertime command from all parents of all time to all kids over the age of 3 - 'don't pee in the pool.' Now if you think about it, there are a lot more good reasons to go ahead and pee in the pool especially when you really have to go and the bathroom's a long way away and it's hard to take off your bathing suit, and gross to put it back on. But Gellman pushes kids further, pointing out how peeing in the pool is one of those disgusting things you know you can do without ever getting caught. So the big meaning of 'don't pee in the pool,' if you really get it, is *don't do bad stuff*,

even if there is no chance that you will get caught. And since life is full of chances to do disgusting little things that nobody will catch you doing, that's a pretty big lesson.

'Course, one way to learn how to do the right thing is getting caught. But it's not the best way. The best way, says Gellman, is for you to catch yourself.

And then, of course, there's 'eat your vegetables' and all the little-meaning-arguments in favor of doing that. But the big lesson there Gellman spends an entire chapter explaining is this: *what you want is not always what you need.*' And the big lesson to 'take out the garbage' is that *everybody needs to learn how to do the hard, dirty jobs.* And 'keep your shoes off the couch' is about *respect.* And 'don't talk with your mouth full' is about *learning how to do one thing at a time.* You get the idea.

Behind all those universally-annoying-to-children-little-meanings, there are larger life lessons embedded in each of the List's mandates.

Well, the way I see it, the inverse is also true. That is, if we're handed the Big Meanings up front, our job becomes to figure out the little meanings so we can make some sense of the Big Meanings in our ordinary lives. Scripture's forever doing that – throwing out some global insight or sweeping ethical imperatives and leaving us on our own to figure out how to apply them day to day. "Jesus is Lord." "Love your enemies." "Thy will be done." Cliffnotes for a lifetime of discipleship.

Our text today is another example. 'Do justice?' What the heck does that mean? Walk humbly with our God? What does *that* look like? Seems to me our task this morning is to break down some of Micah's Big Meaning top liners into smaller, more chewable chunks so we can swallow and digested them, and maybe get some genuine nourishment for our starving hearts.

Usually in scripture, there's some kind of story surrounding one-liner wisdom that gives a hint for how to break it down and use it. In the case of Micah's pronouncements, the story is a long one, Tolstoyan in length; the tale of the long, passionate, and tumultuous relationship between God and Israel. From the beginning it's been a rocky marriage, you see, rife with mutual disappointment, broken promises, unfaithfulness, and that insidious weakener of trust, wanderlust. And by the time today's passage opens, God has *had* it with Israel. By the sixth chapter of Micah, God is thoroughly fed up with Israel's falseness and infidelity, and flat over her foolish behavior.

And so, according to most scholars interpreting this text, God proceeds to file a lawsuit against Israel – stating a case, summoning witnesses, hearing the defense, and prosecuting, all in about the same divine breath. Well, maybe it's because I used to be married to an attorney, but today's fuss between God and Israel sounds to me a lot more like a lovers' quarrel. Because we all know, don't we, that the people against whom God's anger is directed are the very same people with whom God is passionately in love.

Anyway, during this particular joust between the Creator and God's goofy creatures, there's a whole slew of power plays, and sass and swagger, and plain old downhome meanness thrown back and forth between the two— more like a Friday night fight in the kitchen than a courtroom conversation – and eventually, once everybody's had their say, God and Israel get real quiet and just glare at each across the kitchen table, when this third voice comes out of nowhere from who knows who with these sweeping injunctions, this whole new Big Meaning List, aimed at all the mortals in the

room: “God has told you, O Mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God?”

It’s a rhetorical question, of course. Israel’s supposed to know – just like we’re supposed to know – all the big meanings of God’s List. And we *do* know the big meanings; fact, most of us can recite ‘em by heart – ‘Turn the other cheek,’ ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’ ‘Choose Life.’ But Rabbi Gellman’s work notwithstanding, it’s not the Big Meanings but the *little* meanings and applications of God’s List that more often elude us. It’s not extrapolating, but *interpolating*, the great lessons of scripture that’s the deeper challenge for most of us.

Take Micah’s command to ‘do justice.’ We all have some idea of what justice is, and the command to *do* it implies that it’s not something that happens on its own. It’s got to be done; it’s up to you and I to make it happen. Clearly the command to ‘do justice’ is an imperative aimed at inspiring you and me actively to intervene in an unjust world and make justice happen. That’s the big meaning. But what’s the *little* meaning? How are you and I supposed to make justice happen? How are you ‘doing justice’ at Emory Church?

How about when you welcome strangers? Or provide handicap access? Or offer cheap, fun, safe childcare to neighborhood parents? Or pitch in on work days? Or support the Savannah St. mission? How about when we give benevolences to Presbytery? Or send a group to build and heal in Belize. Or respond to the needs of the recent Tsunami victims. Or contributed to a youth scholarship for a Montreat or mission trip? What about the possibilities currently being made available for us to

partner with the Children's Hospital of Atlanta? It's in the little meanings of doing justice that pious words become personal actions.

Or consider Micah's injunction to 'love kindness?' What's the little meaning 'loving kindness? Well, I can tell you more easily when I *don't* love kindness – and that's when I'm stressed and stretched and worried and tired and my neck's tight and my heart's hard and I just want everybody to leave me alone. I've been like that a lot in the last weeks and months around my mother's illness and death and I'm only just beginning to unwind. So when I hear how many of you have stepped up to responsibilities left in the wake of inadequate church staffing, and observe the spirit and determination and perseverance with which you've held this church together, I applaud you. But when I see circles under a person's eyes, or the set of a jaw that's deciding whether to equivocate or say 'yes'...again...or sighs or tears of exhaustion, I think to myself that for all your faithfulness and survival instincts here in this church, surely 'loving kindness' these days means giving yourselves a bit of a break.

Adequate staffing will help with that, of course, and we're working on that. But so will a generally accepted operating principle that the balance, sanity and nourishment of each individual are as important as the balance, sanity and nourishment of the community. I know in our individualistic culture the accent often falls differently, and that under certain circumstances, self-sacrifice has its own wisdom and rewards. But my sense is that right here, right now, at EPC, those of you who have been pressing yourselves to some stress-producing limit, loving kindness now means easing up a bit, perhaps even at the sacrifice of certain sacred programs and activities. This may sound

a bit scandalous, especially as regards our youth. But here's a word for our young people:

Yo, young people. If you don't know by now how valued and cherished you are in this church, you haven't been paying attention. Things have been less than perfect in your program because we don't have a youth minister at the moment and we miss Ms. Christie and maybe not all your needs are being met. But hang in there; things will get better. Meanwhile, are you handling it? Are you?

Okay. Stressing parents – the kids' word is that they're handling it. Micah's word is 'love kindness.' My word is that I'm genuinely concerned for you. Your move.

All right, last item on today's List of divine imperatives: 'Walk humbly with your God.'" What does the little meaning there for Emory Church right now? You've been pastorless for how many months. Your parting with Beverly was difficult and sad. Your parting with Joe was – well, we'll say, mixed. Some of you believe this church has a reputation in Presbytery for beating up pastors. Personally I am not aware of this reputation but let's take the worst case scenario and say you do. Further on the negative side, you're understaffed, your membership has dwindled, finances are a challenge, and about a quarter of the branches of the sacred grove fell during the recent ice storm. I'd say there's been enough going on in the life of this church to bring its membership to its knees, and that's not a bad place to begin authentic discipleship.

Needless to say, for any congregation of well-educated, sophisticated professional Presbyterians, humility and uncertainty about the future are uncomfortable, anxiety-provoking, even painful. But one book I'm reading right now talks about pain as

a source of energy, vision and motivation to change, all of which are readily observable around here. Apparently walking humbly with our God can take us a long way.

In Micah's text, In the midst of the tension between God and God's people, the prophet asserts God's Big Meaning List. But now we know that everything the prophets nag us about has both a big meaning and a little meaning. According to Gellman, to grow up, all we really need is to be fed, watered and kept out of the cold. To grow up *good*, we need to learn the *big* meanings of The List. But to grow up *beloved*, I say we need to act in our lives and communities on the *little* meanings of the List. After all, what better way to say to God, "I love you, too?"

To the glory of God. Amen.