

Sermon Notes – May 21, 2017

“A Dandelion Faith”

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- My goal in these last few weeks before the end of June, starting today, is to give you my five favs. That is, to talk about what I think are the most significant passages in the Bible. To me, that means the chapters and verses that best reveal for us the nature of God and the meaning of a life of faith.
- When I thought of it, it seemed like a good idea. Those criteria – that best reveal the nature of God and the meaning of a life of faith – eliminate passages such as John 3:16, which many Christians would say is the most important verse in the entire Bible.
- It’s the one that most appears on signs held up at sports events, for example. But John 3:16 – “For God so loved that world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish but have everlasting life” – says little about God or the life of faith.
- Now, I’m not troubled by leaving out John 3:16. But I quickly realized that, when making a list of my favourite verses, five is a woefully inadequate number. Choosing my 5 favs is like emptying my closet of everything except five shirts. Not enough!
- Today’s reading illustrates another potential problem. Micah 6 is not just one of my favs. A lot of us have find Micah 6 essential to our faith life. I’m not sure I’ve got anything to say about it that hasn’t been said before. But maybe that’s not so bad. After all, the idea is to summarize the things I’ve been saying all along. You’re bound to have heard some of it before.
- So let’s get started. Micah 6 is a courtroom drama –
- Law & Order set 2700 years ago. God is both complainant and prosecuting attorney; the defendants are the people of Israel. The jury consists of the mountains and the hills and the foundations of the Earth. The charge is that the people have reneged on their covenant with God, which is, “I will be your God, and you shall be my people.”
- God makes the prosecution’s opening statement. I brought you out of slavery in Egypt. I sent you Moses and Aaron and Miriam. I brought you safely across the Jordan River and into the land of promise. I protected you

against the invasion of King Balak of Moab. I've done my part. Why haven't you done yours? A pretty effective argument.

- Micah reports for us the people's defence. What do you want anyway? they say. We are a deeply religious people. We observe all the feast days and the fasts. We make all the required sacrifices. We go to church every Sunday and put something on the offering plate. Oops, sorry, I slipped ahead a few centuries there.
- What more do you expect us to do, God? We don't know how to be more religious than we already are. Do you want us to bow lower? Do you want us to sacrifice more animals? Do you want us to pour out more libations of olive oil? Do you want us – gulp – to start offering our first-born children as human sacrifices? What do we have to add to our religious practice that we're not already doing?
- Micah reads out the jury's finding, and it's as plainspoken as any verdict offered by Judge Judy.
- No, people, God doesn't want more religion. You're missing the point. Listen, what God wants from you is as simple as these three things: do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God. Let's take a look.
- Do justice. This is something everyone learns in nurse school. Play fair. That's all it means. And it's based on the concept that the same rules apply to everyone. No exceptions, not even for the rich or the powerful. In Micah's time, as in our own time, the kings and the wealthy and the ruling class liked to think that the rules didn't apply to them. A good part of the Bible consists of the prophets, including Jesus, telling anyone who will listen that God cares deeply for the poor and vulnerable and demands that they be treated fairly – with the same fairness shown to the privileged. Do justice, play fair.
- Love kindness. The word translated here as kindness is also translated as compassion and loving-kindness. The idea of applying the same rules of justice to rich and poor alike was not widespread in the ancient world. Most religions were state-run and afforded all manner of special exceptions for kings and their cronies. But if "do justice" was an exception, "love kindness" was the rule. Compassion is a near-universal teaching.
- The Dalai Lama says, "My religion is compassion."

- Everyone likes the idea of showing compassion. We can all agree on the virtue of kindness – until people start wanting to show mercy to crooks and criminals, to spend tax dollars on the drunk and the homeless, or to agree with a political opponent. Jesus had a lot to say about that.
- Do you love your friends and the people who are good to you? he asked. Good for you, but you don't need faith for that. Even atheists repay kindness with kindness and friendship with friendship. "But I say to you," Jesus said, "love your enemies and pray for them."
- Love kindness, and show compassion to those who are called life's losers – to the poor and downtrodden, to the oppressed and reviled. That's a measure of faithfulness.
- And that brings us to walking humbly with our God.
- And humbleness makes me think of the lowly dandelion. The name, dandelion, comes from the French *dente de lion*, meaning lion's tooth, so named because of its jagged leaves. In other parts of the world, it is called the wet-a-bed herb, because of its diuretic properties. In Italy, it is called the *pisacan*, meaning the dog-pee plant, because it grows at the side of the road, where dogs often lift their legs. In other places, it is known as the butter flower because of its rich yellow colour.
- The dandelion is the lowly cousin of asters and dahlias and daisies and sunflowers and marigolds and chrysanthemums.
- Why is it people love mums and despise dandelions? I suppose it's because mums are delicate flowers that require love and care while dandelions are persistent weeds that we can't kill with anything short of a nuclear explosion. That's the chrysanthemum ...
- And yet the humble dandelion has many qualities that we would admire if we weren't talking about dandelions. They are useful. Herbalists use them to treat infections and liver problems. The leaves are rich in vitamins and minerals, and the variety of dandelion growing in our lawns was brought to North America by early European colonists, who wanted a familiar, nutritious and reliable salad green.
- Did you know that dandelion root is an ingredient in traditional recipes for root beer? It can also be used to make some very bad homemade wine. So, they're pretty, they're useful and they're doggedly persistent.

- Dandelions are a pioneer plant. They are among the first plants to appear on disturbed soil. They grow anywhere, no matter how poor the soil. Their deep taproot brings up minerals and other nutrients from deep in the subsoil, making them available to less hardy second-generation plants.
- Dandelions are adaptable, surviving and flourishing through flood and drought. And of course, they are prolific. Each dandelion head is not a single flower but rather a collection of several dozen tiny florets. Each one produces a seed. A single dandelion can produce 5,000 seeds every summer. A hectare of dandelions produces 97 million seeds a year.
- No wonder, then, that municipalities across North America, including Saskatoon, have surrendered. The humble dandelion has defeated the best that human intelligence, science and technology and throw at it. Here at St. Martin's, we live right next door to a dandelion factory, and we have given up trying to hold them at bay. Debbie and I still spend hours digging dandelions out of our lawn, but there's more of them every year, and I'm not sure how much longer we are going to bother.
- The point is that to be humble is not to be powerless or incapable. One dictionary definition of humble is "having a low estimate of one's own importance." That's not what the Bible means by humble.
- Humbleness or humility is not thinking less of yourself; it's thinking of yourself less often. To be humble is to not think too much of yourself. Humbleness and humility come from the word humus, meaning ground. To walk humbly with our God is to be grounded, to remember that we are of the earth and to the earth we shall return. As Pope Francis and Mother Teresa and others have demonstrated, we can accomplish great things, and still be humble.
- So that's one of my five favs. God is not impressed by religious showmanship. The life of faith God wants is simple: play fair, be kind to each other, stay grounded.
- If that's too complicated for you, try this: Live like a dandelion – be good looking, be useful, be persistent – accomplish great things in small ways while staying grounded.