**Rules of the Road**

**Text: Micah 6:1-8**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

**September 29, 2019**

When I was a little kid, I loved to ride in the car. I’d sit in the front seat between Mom and Dad – no seat belts, of course – I’d sit in the front seat and watch *everything*. Dad was driving, Mom was navigating, and I was asking questions:

“Mommy, where are we on the map?” Mom would have the road map in her lap, and she would show me where we were and how much further we had to go.

“Mommy, why is there a yellow line in our lane?” And Mom would explain that the yellow line means that it’s not safe to pass.

“Mommy, why is there a car behind us with a flashing red light?”

There was a police car behind us because he was pulling us over. The officer accused Dad of passing on a hill. See earlier note about the yellow line. We were driving home from Detroit in those pre-interstate days and this incident gained prominence in the annals of Ervin family lore because Dad *never* got pulled over. He was a safe and careful driver who obeyed the rules of the road. He had only two moving violations in his whole life. This was one of them.

Mom went to her grave convinced that Dad had gotten back in just before the yellow line began. But that wasn’t the way that the Michigan State Trooper saw it. Dad was told that he could contest the ticket in court the next day. But Dad had to go to work the next day. We had to get home. So Dad took the ticket, paid the fine and that was that.

Whether Mom was right or the State Trooper was right, the fact of the matter is that when you’re driving down the highway, you have to obey the rules of the road.

It works the same way on the journey of life. We live in a nation that is guided by the rule of law: in part because the Founders had a deep respect for *God’s* law: as found in the Ten Commandments, and the preaching of the prophets, and the teaching of Jesus. It was Jesus, of course, he offered the best summary of God’s law when he referenced the two Great Commandments: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (see Mark 12:28-31). The prophet Micah’s summary is a close second: “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

These are the rules of the road on life’s journey. And you have to obey the rules of the road. Whether we’re talking about the journey from Detroit to Chicago or the journey of faith, you have to obey the rules of the road. If you don’t, you will be standing before a judge sooner or later.

A courtroom is, in fact, the scene of this morning’s scripture from the 6th chapter of Micah. The whole world seems to be the courtroom, as the defendant Israel is ordered to plead his case before the mountains, before the hills, before the very foundations of the earth. The whole world is the courtroom, Israel is the defendant…and God is the Judge, the Jury and the Prosecuting Attorney. How are you going to beat a rap like that?!

The world is the courtroom, and God’s chosen people are being accused of failing to fulfill their covenant commitments to God and to each other. God the Prosecuting Attorney reminds the defendants of all that God has done for them, especially how he rescued them from the tyranny of Pharaoh and the oppression of slavery. Then God the Jury declares the defendant guilty. And God the Judge pronounces the sentence: Israel must do what it should’ve been doing all along: do justly, love mercy and walk humbly, as the King James Version says. These have been, and always will be, its covenant commitments. These are the rules of the road for the journey from Egypt, through Judea and Galilee, to the ends of the earth.

First of all, do justice. Old Testament Professor Lisa Davidson lectured on this passage at the General Assembly, and Dr. Davidson said that in Hebrew, this first requirement is very much an imperative: “*Do justice*! *Make justice happen*!!” The Hebrew word is *mishpat* and it means to do what is right. And what is right in the context of Micah and Amos and most of the Old Testament prophets is to redistribute the nation’s wealth and power; redistribute wealth and power so that no one is oppressed, no one is hungry, no one is poor and everyone has the necessities of life. “Make justice happen!,” says the God who is Judge, Jury and Prosecuting Attorney. It’s the first rule of the road. It’s the first rule for faithful living.

And we have to obey the rules of the road.

“Do justice,” says the Judge. But not only that: “Love kindness.” Again, something gets lost in the translation. The Hebrew is *hesed* and it refers to the *fierce* love, the *passionate* love of God. “Love passionately, as God loves.” That’s what the people are told. “Love without reason. Love without condition. *Forgive* without reason or condition or sacrifice.”

The stern warning to do justice is followed by the gentle directive to forgive. “Love passionately; forgive generously. Do as God does.” Just as the defendants are found guilty of injustice, the sentence is mitigated by God’s forgiveness.

And sacrifice is not a prerequisite for forgiveness. Did you notice that? Verses 6 and 7 are an explicit rejection of the sacrificial system. That system required that a burned sacrifice had to be offered to God in the Temple to appease God the Judge and trigger his mercy. But the prophet is saying, “No! That’s not the way it works. God forgives because it is God’s very nature to forgive. No sacrifice required.” And we are to forgive because we bear the image of the Forgiver-in-Chief.

God doesn’t have to be appeased by some sacrifice. The prophet states that very clearly. Which calls into serious question the whole notion that Jesus had to be offered as a sacrifice before God would forgive our sins. It calls into serious question the whole notion that God had to somehow kill off his Son in order to fulfill the just requirement of the law. That idea has more to do with medieval jurisprudence than with the words of scripture. It’s only one of many theories about the meaning of the Cross, some with a stronger basis in scripture than others. In Micah we have God saying way back in the 8th century B.C. that I’m *not* looking for a sacrifice before I’m willing to forgive. I forgive because that’s what I do. I forgive because I am God. And God is love. God is *hesed*: the fierce, forgiving, unconditional love that God pours out upon all Creation.

First God pronounces the judgment of *mishpat* and that God offers the gentleness of *hesed*. But that doesn’t let Israel off the hook. God is saying, “Go and do likewise: Make justice happen. Love passionately; forgive generously. Live as God lives.”

These are the rules. And we have to obey the rules of the road.

Do justly. Love fiercely. And walk humbly. The Hebrew word that is translated “humbly” is *wə·haṣ·nê·a‘*. Micah 6:8 is the *only* place in the Bible where this word appears. Which makes the translation problematic. The more times a Hebrew or Greek word is used in the Bible, the more confident we can be about the translation because we can get some of the meaning from the multiples contexts in which the word is used. But *wə·haṣ·nê·a‘* is used only once. That makes it tough to translate. Now, I don’t know Hebrew. I didn’t take Hebrew in seminary, and I almost flunked Greek. It wouldn’t matter how often a Hebrew word is used in scripture, I wouldn’t have a clue what it meant. So we once again must rely on the wisdom of Dr. Davidson, the aforementioned Professor of Hebrew Bible at Phillips Theological Seminary who lectured at the General Assembly.

Walk humbly. Which means, according to Professor Davidson, walk in a way that expresses ultimate dependence on God. In other words, we don’t get to set the rules. You don’t, and I don’t. We don’t get to set the rules of the road, and we don’t ultimately determine what’s going to happen. God’s in charge of the whole adventure. We are dependent on God for the rules of the road, we are dependent on God for the supplies that we need for the journey, and we are dependent upon God for the outcome.

And whatever the destination, God is going to get us there. This is the sentiment of the psalmist, looking to the distant hills as he begins his journey: “I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help? My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth” (Ps. 121:1-2). This is the One whom scripture calls our “strength and shield” (Ps.28:7), the One who is “a very present help in times of trouble” (Ps. 46:1), the One who will always walk beside us, even “through the valley of the shadow of death,” where his rod and his staff will comfort us (see Ps. 23:4). Whatever the destination, God is going to get us there.

But we have to trust that. When we try to take too many matters into your own hands, and we fail to acknowledge our dependence on God, we end up wandering in the wilderness for way longer than we have to. Like the time when my dad was a boy – we’re talking maybe 1930 – and his family was driving from Lincoln, Nebraska to their home in the southwestern part of the state. There was already a good road across Nebraska in those days. It was called the Detroit, Lincoln and Denver Highway; the DLD. It was paved, it was well-marked, and all my Granddad had to do was to follow it and they’d get home. But Granddad thought he knew a shortcut. So he turned off the DLD on to a gravel road. Then he made one turn, and he made another, and he made another, trying to go generally south and west as he followed the sections of land out there on the Great Plains. Granddad kept trying this road and that road and eventually it became clear to everyone else in the car that he was lost. After an hour he found his way back to the DLD…about a mile from where he’d turned off!

When we take matters into our own hands, we end up wandering in the wilderness. That’s why we need to walk humbly. That’s why we need to journey as if we are absolutely dependent upon God. Because we are.

We have to follow the rules of the road. It’s the only way home.

As we journey into the future – the future of our families, the future of our congregation, the future of our nation – as we journey into any dimension of the future, we have to obey God’s rules of the road: Make justice happen, practice a fierce and steadfast love, be completely dependent upon God.

Of course, there will be moving violations along the way. There will be occasions when we will blow it, big time! Always have been; always will be. And then we will need to rely on God’s unconditional forgiveness. That’s part of being dependent upon God.

Here’s the good news: U-turns are permitted. According to God’s rules of the road, U-turns are permitted. In fact, they’re even encouraged! It’s called repentance. That’s what God is hoping for in the court room in which we find ourselves in Micah 6. The idea isn’t to punish Israel – or us – for sins committed. The idea is to admit our mistake and receive forgiveness; the idea is to get turned around so that we’re once again going the right way. Forgiveness will do that; especially if one is prepared to receive it. The grace that is at the heart of forgiveness will get us turned around. A congregation that depends on God for all things – a congregation that trusts God in all things – will neither charge ahead and insist on doing its own thing, nor hold back and do nothing out of fear. Rather, it will move forward faithfully, loving fiercely, forgiving unconditionally, and making justice happen. These are the rules of the road. And we have to obey the rules of the road. Just remember my Dad’s advice: “Pass with care.” Amen.