

Walk Humbly with Your God

Micah 6:8

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The famous triad of Micah 6:8 comes as the culmination of a long disputatious transaction between YHWH and Israel that is performed by the prophet.

I.

In Micah 6:1-2 there is a summons to court in which YHWH enters into a juridical dispute (“controversy”) with Israel. YHWH states YHWH’s case against Israel (vv. 3-5): YHWH has been generously faithful, and Israel has been perfidious “from Shittim to Gilgal.” The question of verse 6 explores Israel’s appropriate response to the case YHWH has made. What is now asked of Israel after the contrast of divine generosity and human treachery? It is odd and noteworthy that the question is asked of “man” (Adam). In a parallel posing of the same question in Deuteronomy 10:12, the question is addressed to Israel. The double address of Micah 6:8 and Deuteronomy 10:12 suggests that the question posed to Israel is, *mutatis mutandis*, the same question the creator puts to Adam, that is, to all humanity. The primal question for Israel and for humanity is how to come before YHWH when the relationship has been fractured.

Prior to verse 8, the same question is asked in verse 6 in a slightly different form. The proposed answer in verse 6-7 is a “false answer”: burnt offerings, calves, a thousand of rams, ten thousand rivers of oil, my first born. It is commonly noticed that the answer builds from the least valuable to the most valuable. But every part of the answer is a commodity. The answer ponders how one offers something “of value.” The re-asking of the question in verse 8 indicates, without explanatory comment, that the “commodity answer” is wrong and rejected. YHWH does not want “stuff” from Israel or from humanity (see Psalm 50:8-13).

It is only after the false proposal of verses 6-7 that the question is again posed in verse 8. The question implies and assumes a certain positioning between YHWH and Israel or between YHWH and humanity. YHWH asks and Israel must respond. YHWH “requires” and humanity must answer. The God of generous rescue (v. 4) is the God who must be obeyed. The Lord of the exodus is the commander of Sinai. Or in Barthian language, the God of the gift (Gabe) is the one who assigns a task (Aufgabe).

II.

Being warned in verses 6-7 that the right response to the requirements of YHWH is not material commodity, verse 8 now answers appropriately that the God of the covenant wants faithful relationships and reliable solidarity. The famous triad, upon close encounter, makes clear that the first two “commands” bespeak Israel’s most familiar vocabulary of covenantal solidarity:

- To “do justice” (*mispat*) is to be sure that the neighbor is well provided for;
- To “love kindness” (*hesed*) is to practice a life of reliable solidarity. (“Kindness” is a notoriously weak translation of the term.)

The two terms, *mispat* and *hesed*, stand at the center of Israel's faith-talk. Indeed *mispat* most often comes in a pair with *sedeqah* (righteousness) and *hesed* most often comes in a pair with 'amunah ("faithfulness.") If we extrapolate according to Israel's preferred rhetorical practice, we are given Israel's two most important word pairs, "justice and righteousness," "steadfast love and faithfulness," that echo with love of neighbor and love of God. The first pair, "justice and righteousness," concerns the neighborhood. The second pair, "steadfast love and faithfulness," concerns love of God, so that Micah's first two components allude to "the two great commandments."

Alas, in the third component, the one assigned to me, there is no such defining vocabulary from Israel's tradition. The phrase "walk humbly with your God" does not give much to work with and evokes no spectacular connections. We get five words that invite an Israelite (human) response to YHWH that is perhaps even beyond the first two commandments of love of neighbor and love of God.

III.

The command concerns "humble walking." "Walking" in the Bible is a metaphor for a life journey or a life performance. "Being on the way" is a life chance and a life performance. It refers to Torah obedience and is transposed in the New Testament into discipleship as Christians are "followers of the way," the way of Torah, the way of Jesus, the way of well-being. Thus in Deuteronomic theology (on which see Psalm 1:1), Solomon is to "walk in the ways" (I Kings 3:14; see 8:23, 25), but Manasseh, the model of disobedience, walked in the way of idols (II Kings 21:22). That entire theology concerns a choice between "two paths," one that is wide and leads to death, one that is narrow and yields life (Deut 30:15-20; Matt. 7:13-14). Decisions are always being made about the paths and their different outcomes. In our Micah passage, Israel is summoned to a path of "justice" and "kindness." That opens two questions: *How* to walk? *With whom* to walk?

IV.

The question of *how to walk* is answered here: "Humbly." The term is misleading in translation, however, because it may suggest groveling self-abasement that is much embraced in much fraudulent piety. Nothing, of course, could be further from the intent of this prophetic poetry. Israel is never summoned to groveling self-abasement, and the church has a great deal to unlearn about that, notably concerning Lenten disciplines.

Surprisingly the term "humble" occurs only one other time in the Old Testament, and therefore that other usage is important for our study:

When pride comes, then comes disgrace;

But wisdom is to the humble (Proverbs 11:2).

As is usual in such two line proverbs, there is a contrast between the two lines (two paths), each of which comes with inescapable and predictable futures. The positive claim is:

Humbleness will yield wisdom.

This is a primary conviction of the book of Proverbs. We are helped in understanding "humble" by the parallel line that state the antithesis:

Pride will yield disgrace (shame).

Appealing to the double use of the word "comes," Christine Yoder suggests that pride

and disgrace are “traveling companions.”¹ They arrive together. When pride arrives, shame will arrive along with it. The learner may expect to have either *shame* or *wisdom*, and the choice will come by the behavioral option of “humble” or “prideful.” Thus “to walk humbly” is the opposite of walking proudly, that is strutting. On strutting, see Proverbs 30:28-31 where the wisdom teachers mockingly identify four “strutters”: a lion, a rooster, a he-goat, a king, all macho images of self-exhibit and self importance.² As we have seen recently with so many “self-righteous” politicians and ministers, such a *strutting* way often leads to *embarrassment*, and the wisdom teachers could see such embarrassment coming a long way off. Such prideful strutting bespeaks arrogance, self-sufficiency, autonomy, the need to occupy center stage, the sense that I am the only one on the set.

In reading up for this exposition, I have been instructed by two studies, both of which have suggested that “walking humbly,” in contrast to strutting, is to pay attention to *the other*, or in more elitist talk, “alterity,” that is, to recognize that on the path with me are others from whom one receives one’s identity. “Walking humbly” means to be on the path with them, to be in relation to them and with reference to them on the way. The strutter acknowledges no other, and imagines he needs no other and may end in despair. Thus the phrasing of Micah answers the question “How to walk” by calling attention to the need and inescapability of the others who walk with us on the path of life. Indeed God requires that we walk with the other. Bruce Ellis Benson writes:

The Christian can only offer them [the teachings of Christ] in a spirit of deep humility, precisely because they are examples of being truly humble, of being dependent on one another, of loving even those who do not love us back. Of course, even these examples must be offered up in political discourse only in a spirit of respect and with a willingness to dialogue with the other...rather than starting by focusing on *me*, the focus begins on the other. Of course this is fully in line with what Jesus says. His injunctions are what one does *in response to the other*—whether the widow, the stranger, the enemy, or the one who demands one’s clothing. In regard to these last two, Jesus in effect says, “Do the opposite of what you would be inclined to do”—instead of hating in return, love; instead of resisting the demand, give freely of even that which is not demanded. In not responding in kind, one changes the entire structure of the relation: it is now structured by love.³

Lisa Fullam, in her exposition of Thomistic thought, champions “other-centered solidarity” and “paying attention” as ingredients in a life of authentic humility.⁴

V.

We may now ask our second question: If we walk the path humbly, acknowledging “the other,” who will be our companion along the way? The answer to this question is given by Micah, “with your God.” There are many uses of phrases like “walk in the way of God,” and in Micah 4:5 it is to “walk in the name of God.” But here it is “with God.” I do not know if there are other uses of this formulation. Whether unique or at least rare, the imagery is that of direct and immediate companionship with God, so that one’s way of life is with reference to and in the company of, this God who willingly

walks with us on the path. The strutter has no companion, surely not the God of Exodus-Sinai, the Lord of Friday-Sunday.

The phrasing is terse. It is only “your God.” We can, of course, unpack the phrase in rich and thick ways. First of all the companion God of the walk is, according to the first two elements in Micah’s statement, the God of justice and kindness. These core words of faith refer first of all to the qualities experienced in Israel’s life with YHWH. It is YHWH who wills and practices restorative justice. It is YHWH who embodies and exhibits steadfastness. It is YHWH whose very presence on the path redefines the path of life according to neighborly justice and covenantal solidarity. This companion is not just a good feeling or a happy intimacy, but carries along on the way an entire recharacterization of reality as a relational enterprise that both reassures and summons.

Beyond the two words in our verse, justice and kindness, the companion God is the God of the entire saving tradition, so that one walks with the God who saves and feeds and reconciles and heals and forgives and transforms. Thus for example Moses, pondering the next leg of the journey to the land of promise, can say to YHWH with some tone of insistence: “If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here” (Ex. 33:15).

Moses requires YHWH’s companionship; and YHWH agrees to travel with Moses and with Israel on the way...when Israel walks “humbly” with God.

Now we have Micah’s two defining qualifications for the walk:

- How*: Humbly...with reference to the other;
- Who*: with YHWH, the companion God of transformative well-being.

VI.

It remains for the preacher to transpose this redefined *travel with companionship* into a contemporary possibility. One may begin with the commitment of our consumer society to strutting autonomy. This is evident in the excessive virility of athletes who must not only win, but must make gestures of triumph in the dismantling of the opponent. And even in suburban families, every little achievement by a young child ...a refrigerator door drawing, “graduating” from first grade, arriving in church after Sunday School... must be treated in such a society as an awesome accomplishment. The assumption is that esteem and enhancement will generate more adequate personhood. It seems clear, in more careful perspective, that such celebration that evokes strutting...upon which the consumer society depends...produces endless need for satiation and eventually narcissicism.

The covenantal tradition of the gospel offers an alternative form of life that does not depend upon self enhancement and congratulations. It depends rather on self-abandoning companionship along the way, for it is the act of companionship (and not self-celebration) that gives staying power, self respecting dignity, and eventually well-being. The contrast between *self-announcing strutting* and *self-giving alterity* is a defining stress point in our society, a point at which the church offers a genuine alternative. It is an alternative that is pervasive in sapiential perspective, one that is rooted in the God of the gospel who does not need to strut. Indeed, Paul’s Christological hymn is to the point (Philippians 2:5-11):

- Jesus could have strutted:
He was in the form of God.
- Instead he gave himself for the ones on the path of obedience:
He emptied himself and became obedient.
- He arrived at great affirmation from God who stands with such self-giving;
Therefore God has highly exalted him.

Thus the great triad of Micah reflects the path of life—required by God of Israel and of Adam—in terms of *the other* on the path with us who precludes our traveling alone in arrogance or in despair. On the one hand, we notice, as Israel always noticed, that the companion God of covenant is totally incommensurate with us. This God may travel with us, but this God is radically unlike us, and we may not imagine that this traveling companion is only “a good buddy.” This traveling companion who willingly walks with us is creator of heaven and earth, but who on the path has no need to call attention to such asymmetry. It is like being helped by a “famous” person who does not need to call attention to self. This incommensurate quality of the other as companion is well attested by Alan Paton in his poem addressed to his young son:

Do not pronounce judgment on the Infinite, nor suppose God to be like a bad Prime Minister.
Do not suppose Him Powerless, or if powerful, malignant,
Do not address your mind to criticism of the Creator, do not pretend to know His categories,
Do not take His Universe in your hand, and point out its defects with condescension.
Do not think He is a greater potentate, a manner President of the United Galaxies,
Do not think that because you know so few human beings, that He is in a comparable though more favorable position.
Do not think it absurd that He should know every sparrow, or number the hairs of your head,
Do not compare Him with yourself, nor suppose your human love to be an example to shame Him.
He is not greater than Plato or Lincoln nor superior to Shakespeare and Beethoven,
He is their God, their powers and their gifts proceeded from Him,
In infinite darkness they pored with their fingers over the first word of the Book of His Knowledge.⁵

This is the breath-taking truth of “walking humbly with your God”! This is God! And we travel along!

But on the other hand, if we look closely at the one who travels with us in hiddenness and without calling attention, we notice an odd thing. *The other* to be noticed in our genuine alterity is not a holy God, “immortal, invisible, only wise.” Rather the one on the path with us takes the form of sister and brother, of widow and orphan, of publican and sinner, of lame, leper, dead, needy, who in their neediness are ready to travel and have gifts to give. We are mindful of the vexing linkage Jesus made

about traveling with the least:

Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of *the least* of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.... Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of *the least* of these, you did not do it to me (Matt. 25:40, 45).

Along the path we blink and do a double take, like a “rabbit and a duck.” Our companion is *the incommensurate other* who is *the least*; or conversely, *the least* whom we encounter is *the incommensurate one* from whom we receive life. Either way, “we never walk alone” when we perform justice and kindness. The alternative to this traveling mercy is one to which we are frequently seduced. That alternative path that is wide leaves us all alone when in fact we are made for companionship. We are made for companionship by the God who is willing to be seen with us, in public, on the way. No groveling, no self-abasement. Such companionship yields a joyous satisfaction that our strutting can never produce.

Notes

1. Christine Roy Yoder, *Proverbs* (Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 131.
2. Ibid., 286. Yoder, more generously, refers to these four as “magisterial, fearless.”
3. Bruce Ellis Benson, “Radical Democracy and Radical Christianity,” *Political Theology* 10/2 (2009): 253.
4. Lisa Fullam, *The Virtue of Humility: A Thomistic Apologetic* (Lewiston: Mellen, 2009), 120, 184–185.
5. Alan Paton, “Meditation for a Young Boy Confirmed,” *Christian Century* October 13, 1954): 1238.