

Reflections on Kindness As Fierce Tenderness *Micah 6:1-8*

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When Paul names kindness as fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22-23), he is not inviting Christians to engage in conventional social behaviors. He is not urging the practice of good manners, nor asking readers to be “nice persons” whose primary moral compass is the feelings of others as we might think among some circles in the United States. For Paul, evidence of the indwelling Spirit is a church that is filled with fierce practitioners of kindness as a work of justice and mercy. Of course, Paul surely includes gentle behavior toward others and the self in his reference to kindness, but to limit kindness to pleasant social behaviors is to dwarf the Spirit among us. As a practicing, educated Jew, Paul does not invent his potent understanding of kindness; he imports it from Old Testament traditions of *hesed*.

Hesed is one of those Hebrew words so rich in meaning that no single English term can translate it satisfactorily. Biblical translators often eschew “kindness” for more muscular English phrases such as “loving kindness,” “steadfast love,” or the more socially disruptive word “mercy.” Kindness (*hesed*) in the Old Testament is rooted firmly in covenant relationships. It describes how covenant partners are to relate to one another; above all, they are to be loyal to one another no matter the conditions around them. In Israel’s covenant relationship with God, humans are to show absolute loyalty to God who loyally protects and cares for them.

Rather than encouraging conventional social actions, kindness (*hesed*) challenges socially accepted ways of treating others. A multifaceted term, *hesed* presses in many directions at once, a fact that Paul surely understood when he included kindness as evidence of life in the Spirit among Christians. A famous passage of the prophet Micah illustrates the boundary breaking power of “kindness” and shows why some modern American notions seem only to brush the surface of kindness from a biblical perspective.

The book of Micah appears within the books of the twelve minor prophets of the Old Testament. Like most prophetic books, this one is a composite of passages and prophetic speeches drawn together over a long period of time. It probably takes final form during the Persian Period when the people of Judah are re-establishing themselves in the land after the terrain-altering catastrophes of the Babylonian Period.¹ Whatever time is its historical incubator, however, the book reflects much distress following destructions of various kinds. The people have urgent questions about who they are and about their relationship to the land. They have doubts about their future existence as a people. Above all, they wonder if their relationship with God can survive the great devastation they have experienced through warfare, invasions, and displacement. After catastrophe and traumatic violence, people often make sense of the world by blaming God and each other. They normally require explanations, accurate or inaccurate, for such interpretations give them a sense that the world has order to it, that random chaos does not prevail.²

Into this pile of troubles, Micah casts a memorable passage about a dispute

between God and the people (Mic 6:1-8). That dispute takes the form of a covenant lawsuit (*rib*) wherein God and the covenanted community argue about the state of their broken relationship. God opens the legal case with harsh complaints against the people (vv. 1-5). Next, a speaker—presumably the prophet on behalf of the community—responds by asking how to repair the breach that has arisen between them (vv. 6-7). Finally, Micah quotes God announcing that they already know how they should behave in this relationship (v. 8). This is where kindness (*hesed*) comes in explicitly, but we do not have to wait for the famous last line of the text to discover that lovingkindness/mercy is a quality of God.

Divine Dissatisfaction (Micah 6:1-5)

God, the Judge and Accuser in this court scene, commands the people to rise up and plead their side of the case. Surely, God assumes, they have something against him for their world has collapsed. Although God appears initially as the offended party in this legal case, God also recognizes that the people have issues with this relationship. Other participants are called to the court as well. In a typical feature of covenant lawsuits, the mountains and hills will serve as witnesses. God demands that the people plead their case before the earth itself. Whatever beliefs lie behind this literary motif, the presence of the mountains and hills means that the dispute between God and the people has cosmic significance. A voice, perhaps that of the bailiff in this imagined courtroom, invites these earthly witnesses to attend the hearing, “for the Lord has a controversy with his people, and he will contend (*rib*) with Israel” (v. 2). The earth “all the way to its foundations” observes the consequences of the broken relationship between God and the people for all creation.

When God testifies in person in the case, readers expect heated charges against the people because this is a legal setting. Yet the divine voice comes without anger, without direct accusation, without shaming or blaming. God speaks, instead, in the lamenting voice of someone who is vulnerable and wounded, forlorn and abandoned, a covenant partner who considers his/her responsibility for troubles between them. “O my people, what have I done to you, in what have I wearied you?” (v. 3). What kind of legal preceding is this? God’s question presses inward rather than outward toward the opponents. God wants to know how she/he has contributed to the demise of their relationship. Perhaps God’s own self turned “my people” away by action or by omission.

Micah’s daring depiction of the Holy One, self-reflecting and questioning, is itself a demonstration of *hesed*, an example of biblical kindness exhibiting mercy, loyalty, and lovingkindness in divine-human interaction. God’s question is a gesture of kindness, for it opens up the possibility of mutual understanding in the midst of crippling divisions.

God is confounded and perplexed about the people’s behavior in light of the catalogue of good things God did previously on their behalf. God brought them out of slavery in Egypt, provided leadership of Moses and Aaron and, yes, Miriam, and now God reminds them of miraculous events involving Balak and Balaam (Num 22-24). All these saving acts God did for them, so how could things have disintegrated like this? Where did God fail them to make them turn away? Legal aspects of the court case have faded already and been replaced by an intimate expression of pain. God’s vulnerability and willingness to take some responsibility for the split between them

opens the way to renewed relationship.

Micah Asks How to Heal the Breach (Mic 6: 6-7)

When the prophet Micah responds to God on behalf of the people, he acts as if the dispute is completely settled, as if the community's complaints have evaporated in the shock of divine vulnerability. He does not answer God's questions about what God has done to weary them nor does he bring forward any charge or complaint against God. Micah rushes, instead, to satisfy what he believes to be divine expectations to restore the covenant relationship. He asks what God wants from them. "With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before the Lord on High?" (Mic 6:6). He needs to know how the people can please "God on High" and how the two sides can reunite in covenant life. He makes proposals for what they can do to please God in the guise of more questions.

For any worshipping community with liturgical protocols and traditions, Micah's questions should set off alarm bells. They assume that humans must do something and give something truly costly to win divine approval. They imagine life with God as a bartering system. Does God want "burnt offerings" according to priestly notions and practices of the time? Does God desire rivers of sacrificed animals, or more shockingly, does God want the people to offer their first born children in sacrifice. Child sacrifice was rare but probably did happen in Israel and other places in the ancient world. The prophet's questions, aimed at ameliorating the situation, assume things about the inner life of God that are mistaken. They take for granted the belief that God needs to be appeased, recompensed, that God is angry over the behavior of opponents in the lawsuit.

Micah's questions in this passage reveal that the people do not know before whom they stand. The prophet and people speak to God as if the Holy One were a vengeful being who requires pain, loss, and horrible sacrifices to balance some imaginary scale of justice. Micah and his people do not know how to repair the broken relationship nor how to set the cosmos back in order because their theology is wrong. Based on fear, they falsely place on God human standards of retributive justice and distorted scales of human retaliation. They think God wants heaps of animal carcasses or the deaths of precious children as a way to make things even, as a way to make peace between them.

The community does not know, or more precisely, no longer remembers that their God is a God of mercy and loving kindness, showing *hesed* down to the thousandth generation. Perhaps the forces of military invasions and the violent destruction of lives made them doubt what they have long known. The Psalms testify abundantly to a different knowledge of God, a knowledge that God protects and nourishes because God acts with loving kindness.

How precious is your steadfast love (*hesed*), O God!
All the people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.
They feast on the abundance of your house
And you give them drink from the river of your delights....
O continue your steadfast love to those who know you. (Ps 36: 7-10)
Live in Radical Kindness. (Mic 6:8)

What God wants of the people, what God requires of them in this lawsuit, what God has already told them is good for them to do, are three things, “to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Mic 6:8). This three-pronged list overturns again any expectations raised by the legal form of the passage. There is no punishment, there are no charges; there is only a description of what the healed relationship between God and the people will look like. Already known to them from their tradition, especially the Psalms and the words of other prophets, God offers three things for them to do to restore the relationship. These three requirements do not exist apart from one another and seem to urge similar things from different angles. What God requires is for the community to act like God in abundant, forgiving, merciful kindness.

The first divine requirement in Micah’s list, to do justice (*mishpat*), is at the heart of the virtue of kindness. God seeks justice from them because God is just. God expects the people of the covenanted community to do, enact, fulfill justice, for actively doing justice characterizes the community of believers. Doing justice is a way of behaving toward people that expresses profound respect for their dignity, their needs in order to live and to flourish. Justice is at the root of kindness; it is an assumed aspect of *hesed*. Justice in the Bible is not about giving people their rights; it is, rather, about meeting basic needs for physical and spiritual existence. Justice is a mark of the covenanted community and written into Israelite law. It is Torah, divine instruction, communal glue, and they already know it. Doing justice provides the measure against which kings and rulers are judged, and doing justice reveals that the community lives with God.

God’s second requirement of the community, to love kindness (*hesed*), also expresses a quality that belongs to God. God exhibits mercy, loving kindness, and covenant loyalty in this courtroom scene and demonstrates it in this passage. By being vulnerable and open before the people, God surprises them with a kindness that overturns their expectations of shame and punishment. God makes reconciliation possible by interpreting justice through the lens of loving kindness in this lawsuit. Righteousness and justice, steadfast love, and faithfulness go inseparably together (Ps 89:14).

The command to “love kindness,” embedded between God’s call “to do justice” and the invitation “to walk humbly with your God,” binds the other requirements together. To love kindness takes on elements of its neighboring phrases and illuminates them. Kindness is linked to justice. Kindness without justice is the opposite of kindness; it is cruel unkindness. Kindness without justice can lead to surface relationships that deny reality. Kindness without justice can build a veneer of moral living and respect that easily slides into selfishness and indifference.

Micah’s understanding of kindness requires a way of living that does not simply do kindness. For Micah, the people must “love” kindness, be devoted to kindness. To love kindness (*hesed*) is to make it a priority, to live committed to it, to act from it fully. This is the kindness that God wants, the kindness that characterizes the believing community. Kindness in Israel and later in Paul’s list of signs of the Spirit in the Christian community is a moral stance, a way of relating to self, to others, and to the cosmos. It is a response to God’s own loving kindness (*hesed*). The very capacity of worshippers to enter the temple and worship God in the praying community depends upon divine kindness. “I through the abundance of your steadfast love, will enter

your temple (Ps. 5:7). Justice and kindness, not showy sacrifices and violent gifts, is the worship God desires (cf., Amos 5:21; Hos 6:6).

The third element needed to restore covenant relationship summarizes the other two. Essentially, God calls the people to live fully in the covenant relationship. “To walk humbly with your God” is not merely an invitation to put aside arrogance and live in the reality of limitation and creaturehood. To interpret the phrase that way is to stress the adverb and overlook the essential verb that it accompanies. To “walk with God” means to live in God, to share the path with God, to live in intimate companionship with God, to become one with God. Walking humbly with God gathers up the requirements of doing justice and loving kindness and sets them within the larger frame that makes them possible. God’s call to the people in Micah 6:8 reminds them of what they know already. “Mercy and truth will meet, righteousness and peace will kiss” (Ps. 86:10), for “God’s mercies never end; they are new every morning” (Lam 3:22-23). They are a people, and they have life and purpose because they are God’s people.

To walk with God is to do justice and love kindness. If these are not characteristics of the believing community, then it is not walking humbly with God. If kindness is merely appreciation of friends or well-oiled business dealings or polite exchanges with strangers, it does not yet reach the level of divine requirements. If it does not reach out toward immigrants and displaced peoples, if it does not seek peaceful lives for everyone near and far, the racially demeaned, the sexually excluded, the broken and disabled, it is not yet kindness.

At stake in biblical kindness is focus and direction of life. Learning to walk humbly with God is the purpose of life. God acts humbly with steadfast love in this text by asking the community if he has offended them. God now requires of them to be like God: “He has told you, O mortal, what is good and what does God require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”

Each of these characteristics of the believing community—doing justice, loving kindness and walking with God—requires the other two to be real, to be authentic, and to avoid limp acquiescence to cultural norms that maintain an unjust status quo. In Micah and the rest of the Old Testament, kindness is fierce tenderness, courageous insistence on justice, and is rooted firmly and deeply in God’s own being. It has more to do with breaking with how things are than calmly living with relationships as they exist.

Does Paul, the educated Jew, really have this expansive sense of covenant loyalty in mind when he describes the fruit of the Spirit in the Christian community? Almost certainly he was among those who have been told what it is good to do and tried to live by this ancient teaching. He would have been among those who knew that *hesed* describes life in the covenant community of Israel. He knew that kindness has an unfaltering, resolute quality about it, but would he mean to exclude gentle, respectful treatment of others, polite manners, and accepting generosity from the fruit of Spirit’s life among Christians? Certainly not, he might say, as long as such acts of kindness meet justice and flow from humble walking with our God.

Notes

1 See Julia M. O’Brien, *Micah* (Wisdom Commentary; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015) 9-17.

2 Kathleen M. O’Connor, *Jeremiah: Pain and Promise* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2011) 2-27.