



First United Church of Oak Park

A Generous Measure
Micah 6:1-10
The Rev. John Edgerton
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You have been told, O mortal, what is good. “And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with you God?”

This chapter, chapter 6 of the book of Micah, is one of the most beautiful and stirring summations of Christian ethics in all of the bible. It feels timeless and alive. But then, of course, the chapter continues.

Hear, O tribe and assembly of the city!

Can I forget the treasures stored up by wickedness in the house of the wicked,
and the cursed short ephah?

Therefore I will make you a desolation, and your inhabitants an object of hissing;
so you shall bear the scorn of my people.

The prophet takes a sudden turn from stirring inspiration to out and out condemnation. Wrath of God falling on the people stuff. All because of what? A cursed, short ephah. You could be forgiven if you’re wondering—what is God talking about here? What is an ephah and why does God care whether it’s short?

Well, an ephah was a unit of measurement used in the marketplace. It wasn’t very big, something like about the size of a five gallon bucket, give or take. And it really was a bucket; each merchant would have one of their own buckets, their own ephah behind the counter in the marketplace to measure out household goods being sold. I go to the market to buy flour to make bread, and the merchant would pull out their ephah from behind the counter, fill it up with flour, and that’s what I would pay for.

Now in reality, it was only poor people buying flour this way. It was the poor who had to stretch to make ends meet every month who would buy flour for their daily bread one ephah at a time in the market. At any rate, that’s what an ephah it, but what is a cursed short ephah, and why should God care so much about it that the fate of a whole nation should rest on it?

The reason God cares was some merchants were using the ephah as a way to cheat poor people out of what little money they had. Let me explain. I can’t just bring my own bucket to the marketplace and say it was one ephah, the merchants didn’t allow it. No doubt citing the possibility of fraud and abuse perpetrated by the poor, the merchants would only sell goods that they measured with their own ephah and they kept it behind the counter.

And wouldn’t you know it, some merchants began to fraudulently tamper with their ephahs. One merchant would put a thick coat of wax on the bottom of the bucket and then paint it brown, so that the bucket looked the same but didn’t hold as much. They would still charge me full price, as if I was getting a full ephah, but I would really get nine-tenths. Every tenth ephah, that’s pure profit, money picked out of the pockets of the poor.

And another merchant, seeing that this other shop seemed to be making so much more money than them, the next merchant would maybe sand down the top of their ephah just a little bit every day so that at the end of six months it didn't hold as much but you could never catch them in it. There were a hundred ways to make the ephah short, a hundred ways for the rich merchants to cheat the poor. It didn't happen all at once. But little by little, year over year, generation by generation, the merchants got richer and the poor got poorer, until God couldn't take it anymore!

God knew how it had happened, God knew why the poor couldn't catch a break.

So God sends the prophet Micah the thunder of God's judgment, saying:

Can I forget the treasures stored up by wickedness in the house of the wicked,
and the cursed short ephah?
Therefore I will make you a desolation, and your inhabitants an object of hissing;
so you shall bear the scorn of my people.

This is why God cares about the ephah. Because God cares about the poor and needy and vulnerable. The minutest detail about weights and measures is not minutia to God if it relates to how the poor and needy fare. Here in the prophet Micah, we see God's true character. Here in the heart of the bible we learn that God is horrified by an economic order where the rich get richer at the expense of the poor. And what's more, God calls upon the people to change that order, to do something about it.

This is the God we proclaim here at this church, the God we meet everywhere in the bible. We proclaim the God of Joseph, the languishing prisoner; the God of Daniel, the war refugee. We worship the God of David, the farmhand with big dreams. We adore the God of Jesus, even Jesus himself, who was born poor and grew up poor and lived as a poor man—Jesus, whose love for the poor would be no surprise to anyone who knows the bible. The God who is angry as hornets if a merchant is cheating the poor every time they buy an ephah of flour, this is the God we meet in the bible. This is the God we proclaim at this church.

And Christians, the world is hungry to hear about this God. More than that, the world is hungry for a community that lives out the values of this living God. That is what we are about here in the church. We are a community of people, rich and poor and everywhere in between, people trying to live by God's values, the ones we read in the bible, the ones we read about in the prophet Micah.

And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with you God?

We put this building, the congregation's most lasting asset, we put this building to work every day to do just that.

Because God cares about the poor, out of this very building we host Beyond Hunger, formerly called the Oak Park River Forest Food Pantry. Because God cares that people have to choose between rent and groceries, we served people last year through Beyond Hunger 38,000 times. 38,000 times, someone struggling to put food on the table found not only a helping hand but resources on how to improve their financial situation and move beyond hunger. That's what it looks like when a people seek justice.

Every month, in this very building, dozens of people find overnight shelter against the winter's cold, sometimes well over a hundred in a month. Families, vulnerable adults, people struggling with mental health

issues or the loss of income or the breakdown in family supports. Because this church is here, some 1,000 people a year have a place to sleep at night. This is what it looks like when a people love kindness.

Because God cares about the left behind, we host cluster tutoring. In every spare square foot of this building on Thursday nights, this place hums with activity as kids and volunteers work together investing in the future of children. Many, many people in this room have spent hundreds of hours over many years walking alongside a single child as they grow and learn and graduate high school and go on to college. Quietly, week after week, month after month, investing in a single child, because it matters. This is what it looks like when a people walk humbly with God.

The world out there is not fair. Based on how you look, where you live, who you love, life won't always give you a fair shake. Out there, a lot of people are getting a cursed, short ephah. Loans that are more like extortion, an education that offers a pipeline to prison, but not to prosperity. Out there a lot of people are getting a cursed, short ephah.

We try to love a different way. With Justice, kindness, and humility. And the people who walk with us, in this building, through the mission partnerships based here, supported by this building, with this congregation's financial support, with this congregation's volunteer support, we work to make sure they get a generous measure. Like flour in the marketplace, poured out, filled up, pressed down, filled up again and brimming over the top.

The world is hungry for a place like this. Whatever it is that you can give, whether what you can give is a financial gift, or the gift of prayer, or the gift of discerning a call to ministry, or the gift of dreaming up an ambitious new program that will require huge resources, whatever you can give is needed to make this place work. Because hear this: this will take all of us if it is to be faithful to God, and only if it is faithful to God do we dare have confidence we will succeed. Will you join us? Do you dare?