Justice, Kindness, and Humility

Requirement and Recipe
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I began as managing director at Lake Institute one month ago this week, and I have already had many rich opportunities for conversation, reflection, and learning alongside thoughtful leaders, clergy, philanthropists, practitioners and scholars about the intersection of faith and giving. My head and my heart have been working overtime to soak up the rich themes of abundance, generosity and hope, to then integrate them into the future of religious work in our American context. I look forward to sharing in this learning with you, and wanted to offer a brief reflection on one recurring theme in my own vocational life, which seems to be both a requirement from my tradition, and a recipe for growing generosity as well.

A few years ago, the congregation that I was a part of decided to select an annual mission theme, to focus the community’s collective efforts. The first theme introduced was drawn from Micah 6:8: “What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?” This theme galvanized the congregation to look outward, and to take seriously the call to service as an imperative, something required by God. The small-group conversations and mission activities undertaken that year had a renewed energy, and in more than one committee meeting, this verse was called upon to refocus priorities and measure our actions against our intentions. The scriptural theme proved to be transformative, and signs of abundance and growth were visible in a variety of small and large ways.

Personally and vocationally, this passage from Micah has been among the most influential texts in my own thinking and faith practices. The prophet Micah was railing against the failure of God’s people to understand what it means to be faithful, and he indicts their vain efforts, while also offering a very clear path forward, from his understanding of God’s priorities and expectations of Israel.

Micah is speaking plainly about the material assets and well-being of the people of Israel. All the wealth of a people, huge herds and stockpiles of oil, even the heirs to this fortune... none of these will be adequate to please God, in the absence of an orientation toward justice, kindness, and humility.

“With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high?

Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?

Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil?

Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”

Micah 6:6-8 (RSV)
It was this radical sense of human relationship to God that attracted my congregation to this verse, making it a theme for reflection and guidance in mission. When we are able to orient ourselves by God’s priorities, individually and within our communities and institutions, then we can begin to see the transformation of our relationship to wealth, to resources, to power.

This transformation is not theology alone. In fact, Notre Dame sociologist (and past Lake Lecturer) Christian Smith addresses this very dynamic for both religious and non-religious Americans: by acting in a generous way our lives are measurably enriched. He says, in his 2014 book, *The Paradox of Generosity* with Hilary Davidson, “In offering our time, money, and energy in service of others’ well-being, we enhance our own well-being as well.” He concludes that generosity, while not absolutely powerful, can have a causal influence for change in the world.\(^1\) Here it appears that social science and the prophets agree. We know that generosity is powerful; not only is it required by faith, but sociological research indicates that it is also a recipe for fruitful activity in the world.

As I take on my new role with our educational programs and partnerships, I look forward to many conversations about generosity with all those connected to Lake Institute. It can be tempting to focus on the challenges ahead of us, or the technical solutions to address those challenges; this was as true for the Israelites as it is for us today. However, the traditions and practices of our religious communities around faith and giving lead us deeper, bringing us to transformation in response to the challenges we face. I’m honored and excited to be a part of this good work.

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