

## What Does God Desire? – Pentecost 25

November 11, 2018

*Micah 6:6-8, Matthew 9:9-13*

Halloween and the November elections are over and we are now in the Christmas season. Thanksgiving, as you probably know, is just a speed bump on the way to Christmas.

And with the Christmas season comes the unending surveillance by Santa Claus and his spies. You know that that means. “He sees you when you’re sleeping. He knows when you’re awake. He knows if you’ve been bad or good, so be GOOD!” Or else!

What does it mean to “be good”? Mark Twain once described an acquaintance as, “a good man in the worst sense of the word.” I’m not sure who Twain had in mind, but his summary brings thoughts of more than a few people to my mind. Those people work hard to do the “right” thing, or make people believe they are interested in doing the “right” thing, but, deep down inside, they are trying to be good for the wrong reason.

So what are the wrong reasons for doing the right thing? I believe there are two major “wrong” reasons. The first wrong reason is the desire for reward. The second is the desire for recognition.

Micah is sharing God’s message with the people in power in Israel. The nation is in deep trouble. The enemy is at the door. The armies of Assyria are threatening to destroy the northern portion of the kingdom. Meanwhile, the rich and powerful of the kingdom lead lives of luxury while the average person struggles.

Even as this happens, the rich and powerful make a great show of their worship and sacrifices at the temple. They want others to believe they are good people. They think they can convince God of that, too. The rich and powerful want recognition for the time they spend and the sacrifices they make. They believe that God will reward them for their actions and gifts.

Micah lets them know that this is not the case. He has a little fun with them. What does God desire? Does he desire a calf a year old? That’s doable for rich people. But how about a thousand rams? How about tens of thousands of rivers of oil? Or how about giving up your firstborn child? Who could or would be able to or want do that?

Micah spells out what is “good” in God’s eyes. His words are famous. “. . . *and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.*” (The Hebrew word for “kindness” is “*chesed*”). It can also be translated as “mercy”.)

What God desires comes from the heart. Reward and recognition have nothing to do with it. What God desires is relationship and response. God wants us to give him control of our lives. God wants us to care about others just as he cares about us.

Today's second lesson comes from the Gospel of Matthew, and Matthew plays a large part in it. Matthew has been invited by Jesus to become a follower, a disciple. It was not a popular choice. Matthew worked for the enemy. He was a Roman tax collector. Not only were tax collectors considered traitors, they were also considered thieves. They often took more than was required.

To make things even worse, Jesus goes to Matthew's house for a party after he accepts Jesus' invitation. The partygoers are Matthew's friends who are less than fondly known as sinners. They are considered the worst of the worst, the scum of society.

As you can imagine, "good" people are offended by this. The Pharisees were dedicated to keeping the law and being recognized for their good behavior. Jesus was recognizing those who should be ignored. He was rewarding people who had behaved badly with his attention.

Of course Jesus knew what the Pharisees were thinking and saying. Doctors need to help those who are sick, not those who are healthy . . . or at least think they are healthy. And then he throws a quote from the prophet Hosea at them. "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'"

Mercy is helping people have what they need, not what they deserve. Mercy is doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with God. Mercy is not about reward and recognition. Mercy is about relationship and response. Mercy is loving and caring for others as God loves and cares about us.

How much does God care about us? The most unimaginable sacrifice Micah could name was giving up your firstborn to pay for your sins. And what did God do? He gave up his only begotten Son to pay for our sins. God gave him to show and tell us about his love for us and all people. God allowed the forces of evil to torture and kill his Son. And then he raised him. Jesus was raised from the dead to let us know that God's love for us will never end. We are assured we are God's children now and forever. That relationship allows us to respond by loving God and showing that love by loving others.

Today is Veterans' Day, a day to remember and show our appreciation for those who have served our country. Veterans deserve to be recognized and rewarded for their serve. And part of me hopes that those who serve do so as a response to what the country has given them and their desire to have the relationship of helping others so that they can have the benefits of this nation, too.

God loves everyone. He continues to love us even when we look to him and others for recognition and reward for being good. And while that works really well for Santa, God is much more interested in our doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with him. He's much more interested in having us desire mercy, not reward. And he will help us live as those who respond with a loving relationship with him and others. He does it by sharing never ending love. In the end, we can only be good because God makes us good. AMEN