

WHAT DOES GOD WANT FROM ME?

PSALM 15; MICAH 6:1-8
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
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Last week, our guest speaker Michael Fedunec suggested that I should preach “God has a plan for your life” for the next seven Sundays in a row. ☺

Well, I don’t know whether you’ll be dismayed or relieved about this, but I’m not going to do this. But I am going to do it for *one* Sunday. Kind of.

I want to build upon the themes that Michael spoke on last week.

I think this statement, “God has a plan for your life is simultaneously one of the most true and powerful statements we can make *and* one of the most frequently misunderstood and misapplied statements in the Christian life.

I have spoken with many people who agonized over these kinds of questions:

- “What is God’s plan for my life?”
- How do I know that I have made the right decisions about
 - o spouse
 - o career
 - o city to live in
 - o school to attend?
 - o financial decisions?
- What if I make a wrong step? Can I still get back on track?
- Will God still bless me if I veer off the path?

Or, more commonly, some variation of this question:

- What if I just can’t figure out what God’s plan for my life is?
- What if I pray and pray and pray and nothing seems clear?
- What if it’s hard to believe that God has a plan for my life because nothing every seems to work out the way I thought or hoped it would?

I have asked some version of each of the above questions at various points in my life. I'm guessing that you have too.

“God has a plan for your life” very often sounds inspiring and liberating and hopeful. But it can also come to feel like a straightjacket—especially if we have a hard time figuring God’s plan out.

I want to look at this question that is the title of our sermon today—“What does God want from me?” through the lens of the two texts we have heard this morning.

Let’s start with Psalm 15.

The Psalm is written by King David, who begins with a question. Depending upon translation, it says, “Lord, who may enter your tent, tabernacle, sanctuary...? Who may dwell on your holy hill, or mount...?”

Whatever the translation you prefer says, these are symbols from the life and worship of the people of Israel of the places where God dwells.

The question David is asking is: *Who can be where God is? Who can stand in the presence of holiness?*

What does God want from his children?

Well, we have a nice, tidy list of answers here. Let’s go through them one by one:

- Those who walk blamelessly and do what is right (v. 2)
- Those who speak the truth from their heart (v. 2)
- Those who do not slander with their tongue and do no evil to their friends (v. 3)
- Those who despise the wicked (NRSV) but honour those who fear the Lord (v. 4)
- Those who stand by their oath (NRSV) even to their hurt (v. 4)
- Those who do not lend money at interest and do not take a bribe against the innocent (v. 5)

So, there you have it. *That’s* who can be where God is. *That’s* what God wants from you. *That’s* God’s plan for your life.

I’m very happy to have cleared this whole matter up for us all. ☺

Well, of course, this doesn't really make things very simple at all. What it tells us, is that what God wants from us is to be, well, pretty much *perfect*.

Indeed, as we were going through that Psalm, you were perhaps hearing echoes of Jesus' "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mat. 5:48).

But we *cannot* be perfect. We know this.

The famous Roman Catholic monk Thomas Merton puts it like this:

To find love, I must enter into the sanctuary where it is hidden, which is the mystery of God. And to enter His sanctity I must become holy as He is holy, perfect as He is perfect.

How can I even dare to entertain such a thought? Is it not madness?¹

And as a response to the question, "What does God want from me?", "be perfect" probably wouldn't be seen by many to be very helpful ☺.

Is David setting us up to fail? Is David saying that the only people who can be where God is are perfect people?

Clearly, the answer is no. David knew this very well, for David was far from perfect.

Even a general familiarity with the story of David's life makes it obvious that David stumbled and fell quite regularly, sometimes even spectacularly! Most famously, of course, he had an affair with another man's wife and then had the man murdered to cover up his sin.

That doesn't *sound* like walking blamelessly and doing what is right.

Perhaps our second text from Micah will help clarify things.

The scene is an imagined court case where God is putting his people on trial, with the prophet Micah functioning something like an attorney!

¹ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, Inc, 2003), 63.

What have I done to you? God says. How have I wearied you? Why are you so ungrateful? Why do you chase after idols and act unjustly and persist in turning your back on me and the plans I have for you?

The Lord recounts the many acts of deliverance and liberation throughout Israel's history. *I brought you out of slavery in Egypt (6:4), I saved you from the surrounding nations that meant to do you harm (6:5).*

Then, in verse 6, the tone shifts. The attorney asks a series of hypothetical questions on behalf of the "defendant," the people of God. Each of these questions is a variation of the bigger question we have already been looking at: *What does God want from me?*

- Shall I come before God with burnt offerings?
- With thousands of rams, ten thousand rivers of oil?
- Shall I give my firstborn for my sin (child sacrifice existed in surrounding nations, but Israel's God had always forbade it)?

Micah, the prophet/attorney stretches the limits of hyperbole as he imagines how the defendant—the people of God—might try to appease and please God.

And then, the verse that we all know very well. Micah 6:8:

He has told you, O mortal what is good. And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness [mercy], and to walk humbly with your God.

You already know what God wants from you!, Micah says. You don't have to agonize about it, you don't have to appease God with all kinds of offerings and rituals, you don't have to work yourself into the ground to satisfy a cruel and demanding taskmaster.

God's plan for your life is very simple:

- **Do justly** — like Psalm 15, speak and live according to what is true, don't participate in evil, speak against it, defend the innocent...
- **Love kindness/mercy** — don't just practice it out of obligation, but truly *love* it, delight in it!
- **Walk humbly** — in a world where the proud and the vain and the self-serving often seem to get ahead, don't be like that. Let humility govern all that you say and do. Be honest about what you don't know, about your weaknesses, etc.

It's one of those beautiful passages that we turn to when everything seems complicated and confusing—like Jesus' summary of the law: Love God. Love your neighbour.

So, this seems like a better, or at least a more *realistic* response to *What does God want from me?* than Psalm 15's bracing challenge to be blameless.

But if we are honest with ourselves, we know that here, too, we come up short.

We don't always do justly. We participate—knowingly or unknowingly—in economic, political, and social systems that continue to be bad news for the poor. We don't stand up for the marginalized as consistently as we ought to. We are often concerned more with ourselves and our own interests than those of our neighbours.

What about loving kindness/mercy? Well, this sounds good, and we would like to think that we are the kind of people who *love* mercy—especially when we need some! But do we really *love* mercy. Do we look for opportunities to show mercy to others? Is our default response, when someone annoys us or disagrees with us or causes us pain, to be kind?

And walking humbly... Well, this, too, is far easier said than done. True humility requires a kind of "self-forgetfulness," that simply does not come easy to many of us.

So, where does this leave us?

We read passages of Scripture like Psalm 15 or even Micah 6:8 and we think, "that sounds so wonderful. That sounds like *exactly* the kind of person I want to be... the kind of person that I have been *trying* to be my whole life... The kind of person that I sense, *deep down within my bones* that I was *created* to be.... The kind of person that our world, our communities, our families, our marriages, etc... *are desperately crying out for!*

That's what a well-lived life looks like!

But I am a failure at this.

I can't be a Psalm 15 person. I can't be a Micah 6:8 person. At least not as consistently as I would like. I've tried, and I've failed more times than I can count.

We must look at the question, *Who can be where God is?*, as we must look at *all* of Scripture, through the lens of Jesus.

According to Jesus, who can be where God is?

The answer is, of course, *anyone*.

This is perhaps most evident when we flip the question around and ask, “to what kind of people *did* God go?”

If Psalm 15 says it is the blameless and true that can be where God is, the life and ministry of Jesus says that God comes to us wherever we are. In Christ, God comes to broken human beings who don't have it all together, and he blesses them.

Virtue is not the condition by which we are granted access to God, even if some people read David's psalm in precisely this way.

It's not as though God says to us, as soon as you figure out how to be people of truth and grace, as soon as you hate evil appropriately, as soon as you love and honour your neighbour correctly, *then (and only then)* you can be where I am.

We know that part of foolishness of the cross (1 Corinthians reading for today!) is that God demonstrated that God wanted to be where we are before we ever wanted be where God is. And that God went to great lengths—self-sacrificial lengths—to repair the relationship that human beings fractured.

While we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8).

We don't come to God once we are all cleaned up and virtuous. We come to God because we *know* that we will *never* be all cleaned up and virtuous, because we know that we are people in need of mercy and forgiveness, and because we know that we need the help of God and of his community (the church) to become what we were made to be.

The wheel on the wall for this week says “truth” on it.

Psalm 15 says that those who can be where God is are those who speak the truth. Living well always entails telling the truth about who we are who God is.

The truth about us is that we were made for holiness, made to be fully alive and fully human to the glory of God. *And*, that we will never fully achieve this goal as broken people in a broken world

The truth about God is that God is love. And the answer to the question, “What does God want from me?” turns out to be rather simple.

God wants you. Not because you are perfect or holy or blameless or merciful or just all of the time, but because *God made you and God loves you.*

God does have a plan for your life.

Be blameless. Tell the truth. Pursue justice. Love mercy. Walk humbly. Whatever path you choose, *be this kind of person.*

Keep leaning in these directions in pursuit of a life well lived.

And when you stumble, which you will...

Thank God that ultimately God’s plan for your life—just like God’s plan for King David and for the people of Israel, who stumbled and fell over and over again—*has* always and *will* always depend more on God’s faithfulness and fidelity than yours.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.