



FIRST
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH
SPARTANBURG

THE SIMPLEST THING OF ALL

1 John 4:7-12; Micah 6:6-8

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We often ask, “What does it take to do something? What is required?” If I want to play a sport, I must know what is required: what kind of equipment I need; when are the practices; what are the rules? What are the requirements of a job: do I have to work overtime, how do I dress, what are the hours, who answers the phone, what kind of reports do I have to make? What are the requirements of the class? What readings are to be done, what papers to write, when is the final exam? Every endeavor in life has some kind of requirement: to join a club, to do a job, to go to school, to play a sport, or to drive a car.

What is required of us to follow Jesus? Some think it is showing others how religious we are by making a big display of our faith. I knew a man who always walked late into worship, straight down the center aisle to the front. I guess he wanted to be seen by everyone. Jesus has little patience with those who make a show of their faith.

At the time of the prophet Micah, some acted like being religious meant big public displays of devotion and offering vast sacrifices. Micah raised the issue to the level of absurdity by asking if God would be pleased with our offering thousands of rams and

ten thousand rivers of oil, or even sacrificing a first-born child. No, this is not what Jesus requires. Jesus says it this way, “If you want to be my disciple, deny yourself, pick up the cross and follow me.” Jesus is not interested in public fireworks. Jesus gives us an invitation to a way of life – to live in the world following his example of humble service.

In his epistle, John cuts to the chase with one word – love. “Beloved, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another... if we love one another, God lives in us and God’s love is perfected in us.” (1 John 4:11,12)

When the prophet Micah answers the question of what God requires of us, he is teaching us what it means to love: to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God. If we love, then we cannot be satisfied with getting our own way; we can only be satisfied when justice is extended to the poor, the powerless, and the downtrodden. If we love, then we cannot be concerned only with what is good for us, but with the well-being and the needs of neighbor, the new kid at school who does not know anybody, the worker who cuts our grass. If we love, then pride has no place in our hearts, but in a humble spirit when we come before God. We

do not have to make a show of being in worship or making our offering. The compelling words of Micah lead us to Jesus. He is divine love in human form. He is justice, kindness, and humility incarnate.

When we practice love as Jesus commanded, then we find the beautiful simplicity that comes with getting our priorities straight. We learn what to jettison and what to keep; we learn how to set a new course for our lives; we learn how to endure the winds that blow and the waves that swell. Our lives come into balance. What once seemed like a sinking ship becomes a lifeboat. The simple truth is that we are called to love God and love our neighbor. Such love leads us to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God. It is the kind of love that leads to the cross.

Christian love is gentle as a kiss and as tough as nails. It is not so much a feeling as an action, not so much a sentiment as an attitude toward life. Martin Luther said that if we love God and keep the first commandment, then everything else will follow.

Over the years, I have seen congregations get tangled up in issues that have robbed the church of energy and wasted time over matters of little importance.

In one church, it was whether to move the silver closet and some classrooms to create a childcare center for the infants and toddlers of working parents who had no safe environment for their children. In another congregation, it was whether the church should shelter homeless families two weeks a year. On one hand, there were folks who did not think the church had any reason to reach out to working parents or who did not want the church to get messed up by housing homeless people. On the other hand, there were folks in the church who persisted in love. There were people who thought it was more important to provide a nurturing environment for children than it was to worry about where the church silver was stored. There were people who felt called to find shelter for the homeless because they had found for themselves the sheltering love of Jesus. In another church it was helping a youth group come to terms with bullying at school and even in the group when some youth seemed to delight in being mean to the left-out, lonely kid. On the other hand, most of the youth had learned through Jesus how to welcome the forgotten, unpopular, and overlooked kid.

We need God to help us sort through the things that take up our time, the concerns that weigh heavy upon our hearts, the attitudes we have toward others, and the way we make our decisions. We need to look at

ourselves through the lens of love. At first, we may not like what we see. We think about the issues that divide our families, the arguments that harden our hearts against others, and the debates that polarize our nation. Love can teach us what is worthy of our time and attention. Love can teach us to let go of the things with which we have too long been preoccupied. Love can teach us how to be a family again, or how to be a friend. Love can teach us how to put people ahead of our prejudices. Love can teach us to listen with open minds and hearts. Love can teach us to see Christ in the people we find most difficult. Love can teach us how to forgive. If we want to simplify our lives, then we need to hear the simple truth that we were made to love God and love our neighbor. It is the simplest thing of all.

Today, our confirmands are answering the basic question of what God requires of us. You are promising to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God. In simple words, you are promising to love God and love others in the same way that Jesus loves. When you profess your faith today, you are promising to put God first, and see how everything else in your life pretty much falls into place.