This summer, we are walking through the Minor Prophets; minor only in that their writings were short yet their messages were powerful. The prophets were messengers of God who shined a light on the darkness of their day, and they weren’t generally popular. By way of contrast, during the World Cup game last Tuesday between the United States and Belgium, our goalie Tim Howard was unbelievable on defense as he blocked sixteen shots on goal. Someone managed to replace the Wikipedia picture of Chuck Hagel, Secretary of Defense, with Tim Howard’s picture. Thousands signed a White House petition to rename Reagan National Airport, the Tim Howard National Airport, calling him a national treasure.

I assure you no one ever wanted to honor a prophet that way. If a prophet were on Facebook, he’d only have three friends, his grandmother and two of her friends! Prophets were the ultimate whistleblowers. They weren’t liked much because they pointed out evil, and as Jesus said: “And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil” (John 3:19).

This morning, we come to the prophet Micah. As it happens, three of the most famous verses in the Bible may be found in Micah. Micah 4:3 was quoted by Martin Luther King, Jr: “I still have a dream today that one day war will come to an end, that men will beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; that nation will no longer rise up against nation, neither shall they learn war any more” (Micah 5:3). This is the text used by the Magi to tell Herod the King that Jesus was born in Bethlehem: “But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.”

And, finally, the memorable Micah 6:8, which is easily the most quoted verse from Micah. “And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” However, in true prophet fashion, Micah did have some blunt words. “2:1 Alas for those who devise wickedness and evil deeds on their beds! When the morning dawns, they perform it, because it is in their power.” “7:3 Their hands are skilled to do evil; the official and the judge ask for a bribe, and the powerful dictate what they desire; thus they pervert justice.” “7:5 Put no
trust in a friend, have no confidence in a loved one….⁶ for…your enemies are members of your own household.” The evil in the land wound up destroying the closest of relationships.

Yet, Micah doesn’t write just to condemn. On God’s behalf he is calling people to repent, to wake up and to know God’s love and forgiveness. To turn back to the God who loves you and to a life that honors God and values people. So what do you do when you realize Micah is actually speaking to you about the messes in your own life and behavior? He answers: do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God. Some translations use the word mercy instead of kindness, “to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.”

Now, justice has many shades of meaning in the Bible. Two of them that standout involve righteousness and human suffering. To be righteous in behavior is the opposite of sin and is to behave in a manner consistent with the will of God. To alleviate suffering is to behave in a manner worthy of the God who loves us. A fellow said, “I was in the ten-item express lane at the store quietly fuming. Completely ignoring the sign, the woman ahead of me had slipped into the express line pushing a cart piled high with groceries. Imagine my delight when it came that woman’s turn and the cashier asked, “So which ten items would you like to buy?”¹ Justice! To put it simply, to do justice is to do right between people. Something as simple, yet profound, as honesty in business practices, telling the truth and keeping one’s promises. It is standing against oppression, exploitation and other forms of human abuse. Justice honors God by valuing people.

Micah leads with justice and continues with the words “love mercy” or “love kindness” depending on the English translation. It turns out mercy and kindness are both translations of the Hebrew word, hesed, which is my favorite word in the Old Testament. It means steadfast love, committed love. The translations mercy and kindness might suggest a kind of nice loving forgiving person, which is surely wonderful, yet that doesn’t really get at the power of the word hesed. Hesed-love means your fundamental posture with other people is, “nothing will lead me to remove my love from you,” just as there is nothing in your life that will lead God to remove His love from you!

¹ Mikey’s Funnies
Dr. Richard Selzer writes, “I stand by the bed where a young woman lies, her face postoperative, her mouth twisted in palsy, clownish. A tiny twig of the facial nerve, the one to the muscles of her mouth, has been severed. She will be thus from now on. The surgeon had followed with religious fervor the curve of her flesh; I promise you that. Nevertheless, to remove the tumor in her cheek, I had to cut the little nerve. Her young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed and together they seem to dwell in the evening lamplight, isolated from me, private. Who are they, I ask myself, he and this wry mouth I have made, who gaze at and touch each other so generously, greedily? The young woman speaks. “Will my mouth always be like this?” she asks. “Yes,” I say, “it will. It is because the nerve was cut.” She nods and is silent. But the young man smiles. “I like it,” he says, “it is kind of cute.” All at once I know who he is. I understand and I lower my gaze. One is not bold in an encounter with a god. Unmindful, he bends to kiss her crooked mouth and I am so close I can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate to hers, to show her that their kiss still works.\(^2\) That is hedesd-love. “No matter what happens I will never remove my love from you. Never.”

One of the great teachers in my life was Elton Trueblood, a wonderful Quaker theologian whom I knew when he was eighty years old and I was thirty. Elton often referred to the conjunction “and” as the “holy conjunction.” He said there are many aspects of faith and life that seems in tension with each other but must be held together or the result is a heresy that will devalue and hurt people. So we have the humanity and the divinity of Jesus, fully man and fully God. The inner life of devotion and the outer life of service, faith and works, love God and love your neighbor and so on. Elton often talked of the balancing act of conviction (what you hold to be true) and compassion.

The concept of the holy conjunction “and” helps us see the genius of Micah’s command to do justice and love hedesd-love. It is possible for you and me or any two people to disagree about our understanding of justice in some situation. In our disagreement, our inclination would be to separate from one another but hedesd-love will keep us together. That is true for marriages, friendships, churches and all sorts of other human relationships. Life is often a balancing act between conviction and our

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compassion, between our sense of rightness—the core of justice—and our commitment to love those we disagree with. So we hold on to what we believe while we hold on to one another.

The fact is, Americans want to be right and when given a choice between our conviction and our compassion, between our rightness and our relationships, Americans tend to choose right over relationship. The result is a rising rabid spirit of divisiveness in which we are sacrificing relationships in every facet of our society to our rightness. We see that in politics. We see that in the church. We see that in families and friendships. I asked Godwin Dixon for permission to quote a Facebook update of his in speaking about our country, “We can no longer agree to disagree. We now say, ‘It’s us or them,’ and we say you have to be wholly in one camp or the other. To stop this insanity is going to take each of us saying, ‘I can disagree with you and still respect you and respect your right to make other choices without ostracizing and demonizing.’”

What if my sense of justice or understanding in a given situation doesn’t agree with your sense of justice or understanding, what do we do? If we behave in a manner consistent with the arc of American divisiveness, we will leave each other. I will turn my back on you. I will ignore you. However, if I have hesed-love, I will never ever let go of you. While I may not agree with you I will love you with God’s love. When I was at the General Assembly of our denomination a couple of weeks ago, a woman I have known for years, think highly of and have affection for but totally disagree with on certain matters ran up to give me a bone-crushing hug. We don’t agree and neither of us is about to change our opinions but we have sustained our friendship. One of these days she will realize I am right (ha)!

When Bill Bishop wrote the book, The Big Sort, he explained that America began as the melting pot. All of the different ethnicities and various groups began to meld together. But now he says we are self-sorting into small groups of likeness. There are lots of divisive issues in our day that are inspiring our sorting into pockets of likeness. Take the name of our local football team. The Washington Post seems to publish an article a week proclaiming the name of the team is a racial slur. I met with some Native Americans in Phoenix and asked them about it and they said they liked the name and it honored them. People line up on both sides of that debate, as they do when it comes to same-sex marriage, music preferences in worship, a variety of recent rulings of our Supreme Court and various issues in your own home.

Having an opinion formed by scripture that honors God and values people is central to our faith. To do justice and to love mercy, hesed-love,
is a balancing act. You say to me, “It’s very difficult to do. It’s hard,” and I reply, “What’s your point?” Do justice. Love *hesed*-love. Conviction and Compassion. The question is, as you hold to your convictions, will you do so with compassion, with *hesed*-love or merely participate in the Big Sort?

Just to be clear, I am not suggesting that we compromise our convictions in order to sustain the compassion of relationship. Nor am I simply suggesting we stick with others because we have no courage of our convictions. Some people have lots of conviction but are shrill and uncharitable. Other people have lots of empathy and kindness, but little backbone. Again and again it’s the balancing act of the holy conjunction “and.” Conviction *and* compassion. Truth *and* grace.

Joseph Garlington is a pastor and an outstanding preacher of the Covenant Church of Pittsburgh, one of the finest multiracial and cross-cultural congregations I have ever come across. One evening, I attended worship there and listened to him preach on the simple but profound question, “Would you and I rather be right or reconciled?” Oh, my. That’s a tough question. Would I rather be right or reconciled? The easy answer is back to the holy conjunction, “and.” I’d rather be right and reconciled!” What is not so easy is how to do it. I often think of the struggles of Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof* as he struggles to sustain his faith in the face of his daughters’ choices of husbands.

All of which leads to Micah’s third recommendation, “to walk humbly with your God.” The word *hubris* means extreme pride or self-confidence. It is one of the reasons so much divisiveness goes on today. Humility is the simple recognition that all you have and all you stand for are under the eye of the God who is both holy and loving. There is the holy conjunction “and” again, holy and loving.

After all of his discussion of the disobedience of God’s people and his call for justice, *hesed*-love and humility, Micah ends with these words: 7:18  Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of your possession? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in showing clemency.” It is God’s loving way of saying, “If your life has been messy, if you have behaved in ways that have used and abused others, if you have lost the balance of showing both justice and *hesed*-love, know this: The God who loves you, who gave His life for you calls you to Himself. Open your heart to the wonder of Jesus, the God who does justice for you, shows *hesed*-love to you and walks humbly with you even as you walk humbly with Him.”