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“Just One More Thing...”

Micah 6:8; Mark 10:17-23

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A few months ago, Andrew Whaley, Hannah Anderson and I enjoyed a two-hour lunch in Charlottesville with the theologian, writer and podcaster, David Zahl. David not only gave us his time, but also gave each of us an issue of *The Mockingbird*.¹ He is the publisher and if he was hoping to get a subscriber, it worked with me. Any journal that is

- focused on the intersection of grace and everyday life,
- that has poems I can understand,
- and has interesting articles such as how you can find clues of Agatha Christy’s faith in her mysteries

is worth me subscribing to.

In that issue, I read an article that helped me with this sermon in a big way. I am not plagiarizing what Ethan Richardson wrote, but a lot of his insights about Columbo are in this sermon. Yes, that Columbo. He was the best of the main characters in NBC Mystery Movies. Ramsey, McCloud, and McMillian were interesting enough, but they were not nearly as interesting as the rumbled detective.

¹ The Mockingbird, No. 24, “The Mystery Issue”, Winter, 2024. The article I draw on in this sermon is by Ethan Richardson, p. 48.



But before getting to the detective wearing the raincoat and chomping in the cigar, *there is just one more thing—the most important thing.* Listen for God’s word in the reading of a verse from Micah and a story from Mark.

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
and to walk humbly with your God?

Mark 10:17-23

¹⁷ As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, “**Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?**” ¹⁸ Jesus said to him, “**Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.** ¹⁹ You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness. You shall not defraud. Honor your father and mother.’ ” ²⁰ He said to him, “**Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.**” ²¹ Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “**You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.**” ²² When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

²³ Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “**How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!**”

Do you remember Harry Callahan? The satisfaction of hearing Harry Callahan say through clenched teeth, “**Go ahead, make my day!**” is that we get to share in his disdain of the one at whom he is pointing his Magnum 44.

The Columbo stories are not like that. The murders Columbo investigates are evil but there is often something to like about the murderers themselves. At least, Columbo thinks so.

And think of the stories involving Agatha Christie’s Hercule Poirot or Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes. The fun of those stories is that you get to race against the detective in trying to figure out who did it.

The Columbo stories are not like that. Within the first five minutes of a Columbo story you have witnessed the murder, you know who did it, and you know why. The fun of his stories is watching to see how Columbo will figure it out.

Columbo is not a tough guy. The detective doesn’t carry a gun and you wonder if he’s lost his badge. The murderer usually isn’t too concerned when meeting the distracted, disheveled man with a glass eye and a rumbled raincoat.

I like how Richardson describes him:



Columbo—stalls out his car, mumbles to himself, eats chili, chews his cigar, rubs his head, pulls out a grocery list from his wife, asks the same questions, fumbles over his notepad, and asks if he can come back later.²

That Columbo is so **unimpressive** is what makes him so effective. It is not his dusting for prints, combing through data, and certainly not his ability to intimidate or overpower anyone. He doesn't interrogate his suspects as much as get to know them. It is his curiosity that distracts him.

- If the suspect's passion is art, Columbo becomes genuinely interested in art.
- If the suspect is a chef and food critic, Columbo gets interested in cooking and chuckles about how his wife would be amazed that her husband suddenly cares.³
- If the suspect's passion is wine, Columbo becomes interested in what distinguishes a fine wine from an ordinary one, and the measures one needs to take to make sure the wine is properly stored.

It is in *conversation*—getting to know the person to whom he is talking and asking questions—many of which have nothing to do with the murder that Columbo builds a comfortable familiarity with the suspect where they share more than they otherwise would. The classic scene is often when you think the conversation is over, the suspect feels comfortable, and Columbo, who you think is leaving, stops, puts his hand to his head and says, “**Just one more thing.**”

It is because Columbo gets to know the suspect that the conclusions of the Columbo stories are so unique. At the moment the suspect realizes that Columbo has him dead to rights, you often see the murderer have some measure of acceptance. The suspect has not only been found out, but he has also been understood. Columbo's secret weapons, you see, are kindness and empathy.

One of the most famous scenes of all the Columbo movies is when the detective is invited to the podium by a renowned mystery writer, a charming and witty older woman, who has herself committed what she thinks is the perfect crime. You see, during the course of the investigation, the detective and writer have become friends with her sharing how she writes murder mysteries and his sharing how he solves them. She invites Columbo to share with her audience how he goes about solving real mysteries. Columbo goes to the podium in front of an audience of her adoring fans. With what he says, he lets her know that he knows what she did without letting the audience know and embarrassing her. This is part of what he says to the audience, but is really saying to her:

I like my job. Oh, I like it a lot. And I'm not depressed by it. And I don't think the world is full of murderers because it isn't. It's full of nice people just like you. ...And I'll tell you something else: even with some of the murderers I meet, I even like them too. Sometimes I like them and even respect them. Not for what they did. Certainly not that, but for that part

² Ibid, p. 50.

³ I pulled this example from memory, which means I might have made it up. If so, it does capture the spirit of how Columbo goes about his work.



of them which is intelligent or funny or just nice. Because there is niceness in everyone. A little bit anyhow. You can take a cop's word for it.⁴

In his article in *The Mockingbird*, Richardson asks if this portrayal of how Columbo works does not hint at cosmic justice. Do we not glimpse what God's justice looks like from the highest possible vantage point in the way Columbo goes about his work?

We have to go high because if we get lost in the weeds of scripture, we find, *on the one hand*, passages that speak of a Harry Callahan kind of God—a wrathful God meting out justice on the deserving sinner or nation. Then, *on the other hand*, we find passages of a kind God, a loving parent whose punishment is not for retribution but for correction—a God who sometimes simply forgives.

The great theologian, Martin Luther, used that “on the one hand and on the other hand” way drawing a contrast in speaking of God. He said that sometimes it seems as if God's justice is “Right Hand Power.” He knew that most soldiers use the right hand to wield the sword or club. This is the justice of retribution where sinners are destroyed for their sin.

Then, he said, you find in scripture examples of “Left Hand Power.” This power looks like weakness.

- It is judgement that comes as understanding;
- it is punishment that, while harsh, contains within it, kindness.

You can see that “Left Hand” kind of judgement at play in the story of our New Testament lesson from Mark's Gospel. In the interests of time and in the spirit of the Columbo stories, I'll reveal the crime right at the beginning. The failing of the man who comes to Jesus is his inordinate love of his possessions. They

- define who he is,
- weigh him down,
- keep him from living a life that he otherwise might live.

It is not that he does anything wrong, but his possessions keep him from doing the good that he is capable of doing. On some level, he knows this, and wants to talk to Jesus about it.

He comes to Jesus and asks, “**What must I do to have this eternal life of which you teach?**” He is not just asking about life after death. He is asking about life as he needs to live it to have a life pleasing in God's eyes. Jesus hears him but doesn't really see him yet. He basically tells him to live as he already is living, do what is right and don't do what is wrong. Jesus says, “**Keep the commandments and live a good and moral life.**”

But that is not enough for the questioner. Jesus isn't really hearing him yet. The failing of his life is not

⁴ From the Columbo episode, “Try and Catch Me.”



- a murder he committed,
- an affair he had,
- a thing he stole,
- or the lie he told.

It is his love of stuff. If John Calvin were preaching this sermon, he would say that this man's failing is that he has "an inordinate affection of ordinary things." He might go on to say in his sermon what he put in writing: "The evil in our desires typically does not lie in what we want, but that we want it too much." This man is a collector of stuff. He *is* what he has. His life is exhausted in endless efforts to keep acquiring what he personally wants but, never being satisfied in who he is.

But enough about this man's failing. Diving deep into his relationship with his possessions is worth exploring but is not the focus of my sermon today. My focus is on this line: "Jesus looks at him and loves him." When Jesus really sees the man who is asking him these questions, he understands him—he loves him. And it is in his understanding him and loving him that the man is judged. Jesus tells the man to do what he needs to do to make a break from a life that isn't working. He tells the man to rid himself of what has become his life's goal and begin living a life that he'll truly find worth living by following him.

You heard how the man responds. He is grieving. He is grieving because he knows Jesus has spoken his truth. The man is exposed *by being understood*. That's his judgement. Sadly, he doesn't have the strength to change and walks away because he can't do what he knows he needs to do.

But it is a Columbo type of judgement, don't you think? There is a kindness in it, a kindness in the judgement. That the one who has exposed him loves him is his hope. It is his bridge, if he ever wants to cross it, from the life he needs to leave to the life he needs to live. Listen to the stories of those who found a way to move from lives that were not working to lives that were. Listen for how often judgement and consequences played a role, but also how some measure of kindness or love served as a bridge. Just this past week, I heard a woman speak of her time in prison as the best blessing of her life. It got her off the drugs that were consuming her and she could finally hear her family reminding her that they loved her.

Let's turn now to the passage from Micah because it has within it images of both the Right Hand and Left Hand power of God.

Right Hand Power of God

In overflowing wrath for a moment
I hid my face from you,

Left Hand Power of God:

but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you.



An *In-the-Weeds* understanding of this passage will give us feelings—*God's* feelings. And, boy or girl, can we relate. When we are mad, it is hard to be kind. And when we feel love, it is hard to remember why we were mad. So, maybe that's how God's judgement works. When God is mad—I mean really, mad—find something to do in your room or make up an excuse to get out of the house to go on an errand, because you need to stay out of God's way. Nothing you say or do will be enough.

But, when God gets over it, then you have a chance. The hope is waiting for God to calm down, for God's feelings to change.

It is easy to understand God in that way because we understand ourselves. Sometimes revenge is all some people deserve. Certainly, there is a place for rehabilitation in prisons, but some crimes are so terrible that locking 'em up and throwing away the key makes sense. And look at the ways people justify bombing neighborhoods when their neighborhoods were bombed first. Let them see what it is like.

But, as Columbo said, we can be kind too. There is kindness, we hope, in everyone—or most everyone. We will do acts of charity when our heartstrings are pulled. We even find it in our hearts to forgive those who harm us—when love or compassion become stronger emotions than our anger. Parents can bring consequences to bear on their children to protect them and help them learn. Officers can write speeding tickets as much for the safety of the speeding driver as for the other drivers on the road. And we delight in those stories of soldiers being kind to the suffering of the cities they have invaded, and prisoners speaking of their incarceration as something that saved their lives. So, we can understand how God has these feelings—God is mad and I need to get out of the way; God is over it and it is safe to come back.

There is a problem, though, in thinking of judgement as something defined by feelings. Oh, we understand that justice as something done without feelings—a system of impartial Law that protects the innocent and punishes wrongdoers by keeping order in the world. But push us too far, and justice becomes an agent of wrath.

But let's do what Biblical theologians do when they speak of God from the highest possible view. Let's zoom out. Zoom into the Gospel of Matthew and you will find passages of warnings and harsh consequences. But zoom out and see Jesus raised from the dead, not to take up automatic weapons with us because evil doers don't deserve a second chance (there are actually preachers who preach that nonsense) but is raised as the ultimate act of God's kindness. The highest possible view shows what Jesus tells us, that God is love. This is not love as a feeling, but is an ever-present, unbreakable force, that will not let anything that God created go.

But maybe I am getting a bit too lofty. It is hard to get our heads around a God whose thoughts are not our thoughts, and whose ways are not our ways... especially when we are

- so blinded by kindness we cannot see how justice is needed and consequences can help, or
- so blinded by justice that we forget to be kind.



Can we catch a glimpse of God's judgement in that rumpled detective who takes such an interest in his suspects? He does not divide justice and kindness. In fact, it is God's kindness that judges us.

Can we catch a glimpse of God in the one who sees the failing of the man who stands before him, but in understanding him, *loves* him? No one can hide their wrongs from God, but at least we are judged by one who loves us. And that love can be our bridge to better.

And hardest of all, can we catch a glimpse of God's will in what Micah tells *us* to do, to do justice and how kindness without separating the two? When we are wronged, or see wrongs in the world, can we remain kind? That's a hard question to ask of us as individuals, and certainly a hard question to ask of us as communities of people. But should we ever deny the lifeline to others that we need when we have been understood and rightly judged for having failed?

I am sure that we can't all the time. I am sure that sometimes we will walk away sorrowfully because that is asking a lot—to let go of our need for revenge, our hatred for enemies, our desire to hurt those who have hurt us—even though keeping it all has the potential to eat us up—and destroy our world. But I hope that more times than not, we can sell it all off, give it away, and follow Jesus—and follow his example.

