

In the hit TV show *The Big Bang Theory*, there’s an episode where Sheldon, this genius-level physicist who can’t get out of his head and has very little emotional intelligence, is disturbed when he discovers that his neighbor Penny has gotten him a Christmas present—what she calls a silly neighbor gift put under the tree, and she assures him she doesn’t expect anything in return. But Sheldon explains, “Oh, Penny. I know you think you are being generous, but the foundation of gift giving is reciprocity. You haven’t given me a gift. You’ve given me an obligation. . . . The essence of the custom is that I now have to go out and purchase for you a gift of commensurate value and representing the same perceived level of friendship as that represented by the gift you’ve given me.” So, not knowing what Penny has gotten him, Sheldon thinks he solves the problem by buying a range of baskets of bath products from a cute little one with just a couple of items and a bow for \$25 all the way up to the deluxe over-the-top \$100 version with one of everything, and several options in between. He then stashes all of them in his bedroom and decides that *after* he opens Penny’s gift, he can excuse himself and he’ll then bring out *only* the basket that is the appropriate reciprocal offering, and return the rest to the store. Clever right?

So Penny’s gift to him turns out to be a napkin from the restaurant where she’s a waitress; she’s had it signed by one of her customers for him, “To Sheldon: Live long and prosper... Leonard Nimoy!” and he wiped his mouth with it. So, if you’re a Trekkie and you’ve been given the DNA of Leonard Nimoy, what is the reciprocal response?

Sheldon rushes to get all the gift baskets he’s purchased and thrusts them at her.... but then he looks at them and laments. “I know! It’s not enough, is it? Here...” And he hugs her, which when you’re an emotionally-stunted scientist, is about as miraculous as it gets.¹

In a world that keeps score, is it any wonder that we have created a score-keeping God in our own imagine? We don’t even have to be one of those prosperity-gospel churches, who believe that blessings are part of a quid-pro-quo system linked our giving (or to our faithful attendance), to fall prey to the kind of thinking that believes the universe is keeping an eye out for behavior to reward or punish.

And part of that is we know that our actions do have consequences: stinginess and greed demand a fearful, tight-fisted, striving-after kind of existence, whereas generosity and compassion are often related to a life of joy and gratitude.

The prophet Micah discovered that keeping score had lead the people of God away from faith as joyful response to the unconditional love of God, with the One who chooses to be in covenant with us---- to something more like a checklist religion where believers feel like they deserve to be rewarded—like a frequent buyer program.

Attended worship – check

Prayed this week – check (that prayer behind the wheel when that guy cut me off counts, right?)

Participated in Confirmation Class – check

Made a baked good for the fair – check

Volunteered at the health service or JFON (Justice for Our Neighbors) or the after-school program – check

Check, check, check – extra bonus point, a reward earned—I get a free Sunday, off.

Or maybe it’s more subtle...

wondering what minimum hoop-jumping will count as faithfulness? We do hunger walks and refuse to change our consumerist lifestyles. We observe racial quotas on committees in place of seeking racial justice. We send checks for disaster relief and avoid examining the lifestyles that contribute, at least in part, to some natural disasters. We confess with our lips on Sunday morning and hold grudges at work on Monday.²

At least that's how it was when Micah was writing, when his once-great nation was in an identity crisis, with political leaders who disappoint, a growing reliance on violence, there was despair of any way forward, and rote religiosity. At one point, in their past, their faith had held power. Previous generations had learned to rely on God's presence in the wilderness, manna each morning, guidance found in clouds and bushes ablaze in color. When in exile, under siege by competing forces, their faith was necessary and relevant—the community of faith was essential to survive, but now in a more prosperous and settled place, their religion had become more an empty habit to separate themselves from the world, rather than powerful force to engage the world.

This is the setting where Micah announces the challenging good news that rather than a score-keeping faith we have a God who wants a relationship with us. Rather than offer God thousands of rams, Micah calls us to offer a thousand daily acts of love for each other and for the world God loves. The commentary says:

"Walking humbly with God" means knowing our bent to self-righteousness. We cannot "play church" or frame our religious life as a game where we keep God in check by performing prescribed duties. The life of faith is a walk that reorients heart and life.³

And the prophet says, just in case we need a visual aid, a living representation of what God is talking about, it's coming. And just like last week's Bible story, it's coming from the smallest among us. Last Sunday it was a young teenager who offered Naaman the secret to his healing and then later in the story, it was those minimum-wage workers who helped the general to get over himself, brush off the perceived slight to focus on what's important. This week, it's not a young or small person or those with no-authority people that the Bible references, but rather a town out in the sticks that Micah announces will be the source of a new kind of leader. In MA terms, it's like saying the savior will be born in Pittsfield.

Micah invites us to discover the joy of being in a new kind relationship with the Eternal, not based on score-keeping or our ability to appease God, but on divine love and justice.

So for those who doubt, like teenagers, in the prime years for questioning faith (although there's really never a bad time to question your beliefs), don't let doubt overwhelm you so that you wonder if you have enough faith to call yourself a follower of Christ. . . . Whatever you have to bring, your doubts, your questions, bring them, because the prophet Micah is more concerned with what you're doing, than with the creeds you repeat.

If you're all in your head, worried that you don't believe the right things to be saved, Micah speaks to you saying "Do justice." Notice he doesn't say "believe without reservation, accept without question, repeat after me."

If you're thinking that what you have to offer the world isn't enough, it's just a drop in the bucket, and it doesn't make any difference to the overwhelming need, Micah speaks to you saying, "Love kindness." Because we all know love can make us act foolishly, extravagantly beyond all reason—trusting, hoping really, it *will* matter. Love enough to love—to love whatever small, tentative, partial acts of kindness you have to offer.

If you worry you're not good enough, Micah speaks to you saying "Nonsense, that's not the way God works. You're a beloved child of God; you are enough. Claim it. Know that God longs to walk alongside you."

If religion seems like an endless set of hoops you have to jump through, Micah speaks to you—saying think of it as one step in front of another, walking... not alone, but rather alongside the Eternal One who created you with enough to offer and enough to be. Enough said. Enough.

1. The Bath Item Gift Hypothesis (2008) from The Big Bang Theory on CBS.
2. From Mary Oden's Narrative Lectionary Commentary at WorkingPreacher.com
3. From Mary Oden's Narrative Lectionary Commentary at WorkingPreacher.com