

What Does the Lord Require

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A Service of Witness to the Resurrection

Leland Van Koten

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Scripture

Micah 6:6-8

“With what shall I come before the Lord
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?
Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”
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?

James 2:14-17

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but does not have works? Surely that faith cannot save, can it? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

Matthew 25:34-45

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.’ Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You who are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels, for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not take care of you?’ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’

Sermon

A week after the United States launched Operation Iraqi Freedom, with its overwhelming air and ground invasion of “shock and awe,” I preached a sermon titled, *When the Empire Strikes First*. It was a challenging sermon. Several people stormed out in the middle of it. It was March 30, 2003. It just so happened to be Sid and Lee’s first Sunday in worship at Catonsville Presbyterian Church. They *liked* what they heard from the pulpit that day and decided to come back, and then gradually got involved in the church’s life and formally joined in November 2004, nearly twenty years ago. I know it was that Sunday that Lee and Sid first worshipped here because, many years later, it was Lee who told me so. I had no idea. I’m happy to say, too, that those who left worship that morning eventually returned several weeks later.

From what I witnessed in these twenty years, Lee was a man who lived an extraordinary life of faithful witness and service. He was a graduate of Illinois State University and the University of Maryland School of Law. Employed by the Social Security Administration, in both private and public practice, with the last fifteen years at the U.S. Department of Justice, Lee understood how the rule of law, the importance of just laws, and fair elections, support and enable the work of justice and guard individual rights and personal freedoms. I loved hearing the stories of Lee’s experience as an election poll monitor in Ohio and Florida back in 2000.

Understanding how the law functions in a free society, combined with his deep faith and his knowledge of scripture—knowing what scripture calls us *to do*—Lee knew that the law should be in service to *justice*. And for Lee, justice did not mean simply “getting even.” That’s not a biblical notion of justice. Instead, in scripture, justice means “to make right.” It’s foremost a relational term. Justice is people living in right relationship with God, with neighbors, with oneself, and with creation. The work of justice is holy because justice, especially *social justice*, is near to the heart of God and, therefore, a mandate of faith and a fundamental expression of what it means to say we believe in God. The prophet Micah said it best when he asked, “With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high?” (Micah 6:6). God doesn’t want our hollow, ritual offerings that cost us little; God doesn’t want or need our empty piety or sacrifices that are only self-serving. What does God require? Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:8).

That’s a pretty good description of Lee Van Koten, isn’t it? A justice-working, kind, humble servant of the God of love. And Lee understood that justice and kindness and humbly walking with God and one another were at the center of the church’s life. Lee, with Sid, embodied all of this within the life of *this* church. Lee served on the Mission Committee and the Peace and Justice Committee and was a Ruling Elder of this congregation. Lee participated in monthly briefings at the Presbyterian Church (USA) office on Capitol Hill; these were meetings with lawmakers advocating for the social justice policies of the PCUSA. Lee took great delight and joy in the people of this congregation, he loved talking and engaging with folks, telling stories, and laughing.

I got to know Lee best during his time as a Ruling Elder on Session, traveling with Lee and Sid on our church tours of Scotland and then Switzerland, and France. But it was during the many Sunday mornings in adult education hour before worship or Thursdays in Bible study where I witnessed—we all witnessed and felt—the deep faith of this man. We could see into his heart and glimpse his heart’s treasure and joy. I will always associate the book or letter of James with Lee. Countless times, especially in classes when we discussed the causes of the Reformation or talked about prevenient grace and the importance of faith, that we are saved by God’s grace, Lee would chime in to remind us “that faith without works is dead” (James 2:17). Faith, trust in God, intellectual assent to theological ideas or claims, and confessional statements

made in worship are of little use if they do not lead one to works, to action, to service. Faith must be embodied in us, integrated into our lives, informing our choices and actions—all we say and do. Belief alone counts for little, for, as James reminds us, “Even the demons believe” (2:19). Unless belief leads to love, what good is it? Belief is in service to action, service, in service to love. And justice, as Cornel West beautifully said, “is what love looks like in public.”

In a sermon given to this congregation, Lee said, “Love...means more than a passive sort of ‘warm, fuzzy,’ feeling. It means a willingness to put that person’s needs on the same plane as ours, and to act on them.” This kind of love is rooted in *empathy*. It’s rooted in *compassion*. Spending time with Lee, listening to his stories, watching what *moved* him—moved him to tears—one quickly discovered that he had a special place in his heart for the most vulnerable of God’s children. They were near and dear to Lee’s heart because he knew they were near and dear to God’s. I loved hearing Lee’s stories of times when his heart and the eyes of his heart were touched and transformed through encounters with people, meeting them at their most vulnerable and fearful. One of Lee’s most meaningful experiences at the Department of Justice was going to New York City after 9-11 to take applications for benefits from survivors. There were stories of being on a bus traveling through Central America and having his eyes open to the suffering of God’s people. Think of his tireless work caring for refugee families here in the Baltimore area. Or his work with the International Seafarers’ Center, as we heard from Mary Davisson. Caring for the vulnerable. Caring for one’s neighbor, caring for the lonely, the afraid, and the lost, striving for justice for “the least of these” (Matthew 24:40), the most vulnerable among us, is to do the work of Christ, who had compassion on all that suffered. Lee said, “The least of these” are not just the poor—they may also be a neighbor, a co-worker, or someone in our own family who needs our love, but who is not an easy person to love.” Lee allowed himself to be moved by human suffering; he allowed himself to be touched by the needs and sufferings of others. His empathy and compassion, together, moved him toward justice, toward actions, toward service, toward kindness, toward love.

And the person who knew his heart of hearts, knew the depth of his compassion the most, is Sid. For 46 years, you shared a life together, partners in the cause of God’s justice and kindness, and love. You were a team. We know this past year has been challenging for you, we know how much you miss Lee—then moving and adjusting to life in Charlestown. Thank God for computers and cameras and the internet that, together (when they work), allow us to connect, be together, love, and support each other, as we continue our walk toward justice. I know you know how blessed you were to share a life together. Thank you for sharing Lee with us.

Lee knew what was required of him. We celebrate his life well-lived. We celebrate and give thanks for all the good work that was done by him and through him. And our memory of him and his actions will remind and inspire us to ask ourselves, what does the Lord require of *us*? What does the Lord require of me?

“Well done, thou good and faithful servant... Enter into the joy of your Lord (Matthew 25:21).