

*What Does the Lord Require?*

Micah | Miquias 6:8; Matthew | Mateo 22: 34-46

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The Lake Institute on Faith and Giving at Indiana University recently released the results of its Covid-19 study. The institute surveyed 555 congregations about how the pandemic had affected their life this year and their planning for the future. The report found that 14% of congregations surveyed had reduced their budgets in the past six months as they look ahead to next year. It seems understandable that churches would scale back their budgets as a result of the pandemic. The report also confirmed that most of those that had needed to cut their ministry budgets were smaller congregations that did not have the benefit of digital resources or electronic giving platforms. Larger churches have fared somewhat better because of their scale. But you might be surprised to learn that an even greater number of churches -- 30% -- have actually taken on new financial commitments and increased their funding obligations this year by raising money and marshalling their membership to support initiatives in their communities. It's not that these congregations are cavalierly venturing ahead despite the circumstances of this time but that these churches have risen to the moment by attending to two things at the same time: they're managing their internal needs and finding new ways to reach out externally in response to increasing community challenges. Our own church is among this greater share of institutions that are doing two things at once. We are both attending to our existing ministry by adapting it to a digital landscape and supporting our community in creative ways. What I find interesting about the Lake Institute report is that our outreach this year doesn't make us exceptional. This is what it's like to be a faith community today. "What does the Lord require of you?" I think it's inspiring that churches all over the country are listening to the needs of their communities.

It would be easy to lose sight of how far we've come since March 15 and how much we've done this year. So let me just review. In late March, we joined a community-wide initiative to deliver food to Chapel Hill-Carrboro school students affected by school closures. Early this summer, our church was awarded a \$65,000 grant by Duke University to support the manufacture and distribution of face masks. I'm sure you haven't forgotten about our Spreading Justice Initiative, which has made emergency relief grants available to those affected by the economic fallout of Covid-19. And now our church is learning about plans to support families involved in remote learning plans since students are still unable to return to their classrooms. These are some of our institutional commitments. But I'm sure that as a church we are merely a reflection of many stories from our personal lives. How many people among us are doing the same thing? Trying to take care of ourselves in the midst of a pandemic and at the same time reaching out to help in response to the increased needs around us.

I'm not surprised that so many people of faith and so many religious institutions are finding ways to care for themselves and tend to others because that is the result of learning to worship God. Jesus said to the Pharisees this is the greatest commandment - You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind; and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. When we worship God we learn to put God before everything else in our lives. And so we find ourselves listening in a new way. We find ourselves responsible to more than we had begun to think. To love God is to worship God. To worship God is to put God before our needs and desires.

On November 2 the congregation will meet to approve a budget for our ministry in the next year. In the following weeks, our stewardship board will give us all a chance to make our commitments to ministry together in the year ahead. Like almost every pastor surveyed by the Lake Institute, I am - to be rather honest - somewhat more anxious than usual about this year's campaign. I know that we've all been balancing a lot this year, managing the boundary between our internal needs and the desire to serve others. I know that we've been doing this institutionally, and I know that every household has been walking a similar journey in their private lives. I also worry a bit that there are folks who may have drifted away from the church in this dispersion. And I know that there are some among us who have lost wages or jobs, or who face extreme difficulties in their families. Aside from the considerations involved with the pledge campaign itself, our inability to worship in person puts a strain on the church in ways that everyone may not be able to appreciate. It's kind of difficult to make the numbers add up without the sliver of giving that comes in when we pass the plate on Sunday mornings and when we make space in our building available to other organizations. So I just don't think it would be very honest to say there is nothing for us to worry about as we look ahead to the next year. It's simply hard to anticipate what the winter will bring and when we may be in a position to resume more regular activities.

At the same time, I know that everyone will see at the Congregational Meeting what I know to be true - that we have very attentive and engaged leaders who are shepherding us through this process and making very faithful decisions. I know that our congregation is very generous with the church's needs, and that everyone here is thinking prayerfully about what they can do - to care for themselves, to provide for our ministry, to love our neighbors in the community. And finally I believe, as an act of faith, that making the numbers add up right is not the most important thing. If we are fixated on the numbers then we are worshiping something other than God. The question is not - what does the budget require of you. But what does the Lord require of you?

To do justice. To love kindness. To walk humbly with God.

What's most important is that we worship God. In the gifts that we make personally. In our household budgets. In our church budget. In the work we do day by day. In our politics and voting decisions. What's most important is that we worship God. This is the greatest commandment, Jesus has said - That you love the Lord your God with your whole heart, soul, strength, and mind; and that you love your neighbor as yourself.

I like to say that we have been reaching in and reaching out this year. If you look back on the past six months you can see that we have been reaching in to attend to the needs of the church, to provide for the commitments that we have already made, to adjust our course and make creative adaptations for this unusual landscape. And you can also see just how much we all have committed, like so many other congregations, to taking on new commitments. Why? That is what the Lord requires of us in this time. Maybe the Lord also requires us to let go of this illusion we have that we actually control the circumstances of our lives. To worship God is to accept that our lives are contingent on God's activity. To walk humbly with God is literally to embrace the lessons in humility that the pandemic has extended to all of us.

Let's be honest with ourselves. In our households. In the church. We can't control when this ends. We may not even be able to get the numbers to add up right. But we do get to decide what we will worship in this time. Will we worship God? How will we put God first?

And just what does the Lord require of us?