I don’t normally do this, but I would like to take a moment this morning of personal privilege before launching into the rest of the sermon—such as it will be. You see, after our resident reunion this week, I went to Chicago for a symposium of 15 colleagues put on by the Templeton Foundation, addressing the church, the pastor and our growing secular culture. I got home late Friday night and was heading to my blank computer screen early yesterday morning with a cup of coffee in hand, ready to see if God had a word for us today.

Apparently, God did. The phone rang. It was my mother-in-law calling. *I think Bill is dead*, she said. Kim and I hurried to their place and when we arrived, the paramedics expressed their sympathies and assured us they had done all they could.

Bill O’Brien, our dear church member, brother and friend is with the Lord. He was Wilshire’s first fulltime minister of music back in the mid-1950s. He took his wife and children to Indonesia as missionaries. He later served as vice president of the International Mission Board and then the director of the Global Center for Missions at Samford University in Birmingham. His first wife, Dellanna, was president of the Woman’s Missionary Union. We’re talking about Baptist royalty here. After she passed, Bill moved back to the Dallas area and some months later he visited Wilshire for a Fourth of July concert. Candy and Max Post invited him to sit at our table for dinner. He saw this beautiful woman across the table who looked strikingly like a more mature version of my wife, Kim. Nine months later, ten years ago next month, they were married on our back porch.

Some of you knew Bill as a Sunday school teacher or choir member or executive director of the Gaston Christian Center. He never quit learning, growing or blessing anyone and everyone around him.

I tell you all of that because I would like not to have to tell you all the same things individually. And because it takes up some of
the time allotted for a sermon that I only got to yesterday afternoon, don't you know?!

In God’s good timing, it turns out the texts I am preaching on today make more sense in light of Bill’s life and death. Bill embodied the Beatitudes. All of them. He would tell you he was a blessed man, just as I would tell you he was a blessing. His being blessed was not, however, a reward for his being poor in spirit, meek, hungry and thirsty for justice, merciful, pure in heart, peaceable and persecuted for righteousness sake. Rather he was blessed simply in being the kind of man the beatitudes describe. He was in all the best ways a good man. Which is to say, he knew innately what so many of us wrestle needlessly to know—that is, what is good.

The prophet Micah said God had a complaint with Israel. After all God had done for God’s people—delivering them from slavery in Egypt, rescuing them from the hand of kings who wished them harm, guiding them from Shittim to Gilgal, across the Jordan River into the Promised Land—how is it they could have begun to live as though none of that mattered? How could they have forgotten what God cares about?

The prophet knows how the people are apt to respond. They will run to the temple with burnt offerings trying to buy their forgiveness. They will make shows of religious rituals that they hope will purchase God’s favor. All the while, they will go on living the way they want to.

And don't we do this? Aren’t we apt to make all sorts of promises to God when things go wrong in our lives? Oh, God, if you will only get me out of this, I will become a faithful church member. I will give a tithe. I will pray every day and read my Bible. I will teach middle school Sunday school. Whatever you need, God. We start to make religious bargains, big spiritual gestures to get God back on our side.

But what God really wants, God has already told us: simple everyday living that we see in the beatitudes. Ordinary acts of justice, kindness and humility in our walk with God. You already know what you need to know. God has told you ... 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?

If we want to experience the
blessing and favor of God, we already know what that entails. The problem is not in not knowing; the problem is in not doing. The good news is that what is good and what God requires of us is within our reach. You don't have to be a theologian or a super-saint. You don't have to give up your job or promise your firstborn child to the ministry.

Do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God. These three are really one, but we'll treat them separately as a way of unpacking what is good.

Do justice. Live justly. Care about fairness and equity. The Hebrew word for justice in this text is mishpat. It means a commitment to a way of life governed by law that applies to everyone equally. This kind of justice means that people who are innocent do not suffer harm at the hands of the powerful. They are defended against those who would oppress them or scapegoat them for their own purposes. God cares about what is right and does not want a world where right is defined by might. If God’s people want to know God’s favor, they must be committed to upholding a system of law that defends the innocent.

In our world today as in Micah’s time, we see the crippling effects of what happens when this is not kept. Our criminal justice system is supposed to be blind, but time after time we see that if you are poor, black, a woman, a refugee, you are treated differently than if you are rich, white, male, or a citizen. This country was founded on the premise that all human beings were created equal and should be judged equally as well. We are a country of laws, not men. And we got this from our biblical faith.

The other side to mishpat is this: we are to hold accountable those who are guilty, no matter who they are. We cannot pretend to be good while protecting those who do others harm.

The church has a terrible history of defending slaveholders instead of slaves, abusers instead of the abused, the powerful instead of the powerless. We continue to do so today. And often we do so thinking that by covering things up, we are somehow protecting the church or the country. We are afraid that if we expose the truth and hold people accountable, we will lose our place in society. The opposite is
true. When we fail to do justice, we will fall, and great will be our fall. We will lose our moral voice, and no one will trust us when we call on others to believe the good news of Jesus Christ.

We are also to love kindness. The word *hesed* is not easy to translate. Lovingkindness. Mercy. It’s the logical extension of *mishpat* or justice. If treating people fairly is a baseline of goodness, kindness or mercy is a positive way to show what God requires of us.

I met a new friend this week. Laura Truax is the pastor of the Lasalle Street Church in Chicago. She was telling us about her neighbor in her North Chicago neighborhood, an obese man in a wheelchair named Marshall Klein who suffered from diabetes. His condition had deteriorated to the point where gangrene had set in on his feet. He had two upstairs neighbors, John and Dennis, gay partners in their 60s who had cared for him with amazing kindness. Every two weeks they cleaned his wounds and changed the bandages on his feet, hoping to stave off amputation.

John and Dennis had to leave town and they called on Laura to see if she would take over for them while they were gone. She’s a pastor. What could she say? She asked if she could watch what they did so she would be prepared. She went over and stood alongside them, watching as they gently cared for him. She saw them kneel at his feet, take off his socks and deal with the terrible stench. They washed his blackening, decaying skin, anointing his feet with oils and wrapping them up carefully.

Laura was dumbstruck by the grace of their service. Afterward, she turned to them and said she would never again be able to read or talk about Jesus washing the feet of Peter without thinking of them. They had shown her what kindness looked like. Tears came to their eyes. John and Dennis meekly turned away from her and went about their business, not knowing what to say. She realized the irony. Here were two men who had only known pain and rejection at the hands of their Catholic churches because of their love for one another. And now a pastor was telling them she was learning from them about the lovingkindness of Christ himself. It was too much to take in.
Justice requires that we treat people equally and fairly. Kindness or mercy requires us to treat them as children of God. Each of these reveal that we are walking humbly with God.

Craig Clickman has said: *Humility is not thinking less of yourself than you are. Nor is humility always talking about your faults and shortcomings as compared to everyone else’s superiority and achievements. Humility is simply a recognition of the truth about ourselves; and then most often, a forgetfulness of self that allows genuine concern for others and a genuine worship of God.*

This kind of humility is in short supply today. Our faith leaders and political leaders are modeling the opposite of humility. They brag about themselves and we defend them. They point to their own achievements and we aspire to be like them. By celebrating the attitude of those who are self-centered and self-promoting, we become more like them. And this is dangerous to our souls.

The emphasis in this third phrase is on our walk with God. The word for walk is *halak.* Jews are called to live a life of *halakha,* that is, a lifestyle of commandment-keeping that reflects the heart of God. Christians sometimes talk this way, too. We talk about a person’s walk with God. We say it’s not enough to talk the talk, you have to walk the walk.

A young man once received a medal from an organization which used very extravagant language in extolling his accomplishments. Jubilantly the prize winner repeated the words, to his mother. Then he asked, *How many great men are there in the world today?* His mother pondered for a while and then wisely said, *One less than you think!*

I have a mother like that. We all need mothers who are like Micah, reminding us of what the Lord requires. On the other hand, maybe what we really need is a man like Bill O’Brien to remind us of what we already know about what is good. Or maybe, what we really need is to be those kind of people ourselves. Amen.