

My Discernment  
Micah 6:8  
February 18, 2018  
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This Lent, Pastor Abby and I are preaching through a series titled, "Faith You Can Fit in Your Pocket." Our hope is to share verses from the scriptures that we think provide helpful guidance or a hopeful image that can sustain us. We will print the verse on the front of the bulletin and you can literally take those words and place them in your pocket if you like. Micah 6:8 was third on our list but it got bumped up today because it will help me share the story of all that has led me to be seriously considering running for the state House of Representatives in 2018.

I think Micah 6:8 sums up much of the Bible. Do justice: the Bible is concerned about a particular type of justice, a justice that ensures that everyone has enough and is treated with dignity. Love kindness (or mercy): the Hebrew suggests that this kindness is to be directed towards those who are facing misfortune. Walk humbly with your God: This path is a journey, and we walk it remembering that we rely on the Ground and Source of Being for each day. Everything is gift and grace.

The first line is important to me as well: What does God require of you? What does God require of us? Of the church? In this time. Many of us are asking some different questions of ourselves in this time, feeling nudged, led, pushed to get involved in some ways that we haven't been before, or for a while. Clergy I'm in conversation with are asking some different questions of themselves too, in this time.

For roughly 10 years, I been wondering off and on whether my call includes pursuing elected office. Early on I let those thoughts go as crazy, not me, not a fit for my gifts, not what a pastor does. But these questions have stayed with me.

When I served a church in Dodgeville, WI, a print shop owner ran for the state House of Representatives. He challenged the speaker of the state House who represented our district. He was a huge underdog, and he pulled people together, generated a lot of enthusiasm and won. His campaign manager was a woman who was at the center of the life of the church I

served, and they kind of ran the campaign out of a room in the basement of the church that was a couple doors down from my office. I'd walk by and see them huddled in strategy and conversation, and then I watched them organize and pull a whole district together. It was inspiring. This campaign manager may not have talked about her faith as a driver, but I knew it was in there: concern for her neighbors, concern for the well-being of people in the district and the state. A call to try to do something about it.

Long after this race, I was talking with this woman who was a church pillar and the campaign manager and the topic turned to politics and to people who should run for office. I was talking about how I thought a friend of ours, a young physician, would be good candidate. She agreed and then said, "you know, you wouldn't be so bad yourself." That was the first time someone had said that to me, "Heh, heh, heh," I laughed and I stepped away from her.

Our family moved to Northfield, and we, as a church, started doing justice work through ISAIAMN. I was having conversations with elected leaders. Some conversations were great, some not so great. I started asking questions like, "should the church be more intentional about sending its people, rooted in its values, into public life, because social transformation happens there. There are clergy and lay leaders here and throughout the state whom I deeply admire that I would love to see making these decisions and casting a vision for how we should live together."

So, I started asking some people, "have you considered running for office?" I got some quick no's. I had some nice conversations as well with people who have wrestled with it. And then about a year ago, I decided that if I was going to be asking this of others in the church, if there were clergy that I admired that I would like to see take this leap, I needed to be asking the question of myself. My wife Sara and I started discussing this possibility. About this same time Carolyn Fure-Slocum asked me if I have ever considered running for office and I said, "actually I have." "Good, you should." she said.

I had a couple conversations with colleagues, and they encouraged me to explore the question too. I went into my sabbatical wanting to explore this question some more. I read Paul Wellstone and others and connected the dots to central Biblical themes. I emerged from sabbatical feeling settled that at some point I needed to give running for office a try or I would

always wonder. I thought maybe 2020 would be a good time if there was an opening. I reached out to Senator Kevin Dahle, and he graciously agreed to have a conversation with me. He was encouraging, as I expect he is with anyone asking these questions. He said, “throw your hat in the ring. I’m sure your church would be supportive.” I thought, “it might be a little more complicated than that.”

I talked with a state representative who lives in Minneapolis and is married to a UCC pastor. I had conversations with a few colleagues and a couple others with whom I work closely. They were encouraging too. Then I stopped. I felt like I had had as many conversations as I could without the question spilling into the church in an unhelpful way.

On Monday February 5th, I was minding my own business, and I received a text from someone who has been encouraging me to run telling me that David Bly had announced he was going to retire. I took a breath. Sara and I started talking in earnest again. This led to conversations with Abby, our Moderator and Vice Moderator, current and former council members, a couple more state legislators including David Bly, and Wednesday I invited all of you to help me with this discernment. Many of you have responded. Your comments have been very kind, thoughtful, honest, and helpful.

I’ve been thinking some about the specific faith values that would be driving me. The first is abundance. We practice the story that when bread is broken and shared, there is more than enough. I firmly believe that our state has enough wealth to invest in the things that really matter: real solutions for health care and mental health care, fully funding education, being able to care for our loved ones at the beginning and end of life, clean energy.

The other value is loving the neighbor. We must turn towards our neighbors, see ourselves in our neighbors, and discover that we don’t have to be so afraid. There are divisions that need to be bridged in our district, divisions between Northfield and Lonsdale and Montgomery. I live in and love Northfield and I grew up in a smaller version of Montgomery and Lonsdale, and I love those places too. I want to help bridge divides that are present between Northfield and Lonsdale and Montgomery. I live in Northfield, but I grew up in a small Montgomery, a small Lonsdale. I care about and understand people in Northfield and I care about and understand people in Montgomery and Lonsdale because I’m one of them too. We

need to bring together the professional class, and working class, farmers, immigrants and students. We need to bring together women and men, glbtq and straight, people of color and white people, rural and urban, and we need to see one another and recognize the needs we share. It is only by coming together that we will be able to address the biggest challenges that we face.

You will have a chance to ask more questions after worship, but I want to respond to the three main questions that have been coming up.

The first question is about how we would staff our ministries at First UCC. I care about this question too. I love this church and want our ministries to continue to thrive. I also don't want to place an unrealistic burden on Abby and other staff. If I was elected, I would expect that my compensation would be renegotiated so that additional funds would be available for hiring staff. My plan is to remain in the Senior Minister role, providing overall spiritual leadership, managing staff, working with the Council on strategy and discernment of our ministry and being as present in worship as I can be. There are many details to sort out, but that is a starting point.

The second question relates to how I would handle faith and partisan politics coming together very visibly in me, in the pulpit. My answer is, "very carefully." If this goes forward, I will be having intentional conversations with lawyers about the lines that cannot be crossed. My first thought is that it would be critical to avoid manipulating the pastoral office for political gain.

Also, how would I respond to those who don't want to vote for me? I'd be running through the DFL. Will there be room in the church for Republicans or will worship be a weekly campaign rally? My hope is that those who disagree with me will still feel respected, and will be able to trust me enough for me to still serve as their pastor.

Finally, there is an overarching question about the separation of church and state. I've found this statement by sociologist William Martin helpful. In his book *With God on Their Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America*, he wrote this: As a basic premise, we must remember that the Founding Fathers intended that the state be neutral toward all religions, but did not intend that religious people or their organizations be neutralized, their voices restricted to private matters only. Of course, religious people have a right to be involved in political activity, and they cannot be expected to leave their religious convictions behind when they enter the political arena. They have a right to organize themselves to work effectively for the good of their

country as they understand it, and that understanding will inevitably be informed by their religious faith...We cannot separate religion and politics. The question is how they are to be related in such a way as to maintain the pluralism that has served us so well.

I look forward to hearing your thoughts and questions after worship today, and I thank you for receiving this portion of my spiritual journey with thoughtfulness and grace. Amen.