A couple of years ago, in response to terrorist attacks, President Bush announced that America was about to launch “Operation Infinite Justice.” A quick and strong outcry from a great number of religious leaders led the administration to change the title -- because there is power in a name. Many leaders objected to the use of the word “infinite” – that it made it look like we were trying to play God. Others objected to the use of the word “justice” – that “justice” is an important religious word meaning well-being for all, and that it shouldn’t be used to mean getting even or punishing evildoers. The whole uproar is a great example of confusion about God, religion, and justice – themes that are central in today’s scripture lessons.\n
“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table.” I’m a great believer in the fundamental goodness of human beings – that we are created in God’s image and that deep down there is always a divine spark within us. Some people say I am naive, some say I am too idealistic, but I’d like to believe that if the rich man had ever stopped to look at Lazarus, to imagine what it was like to be in such a state, that he’d have been moved by compassion and done something to ease Lazarus’ misery. I’d like to believe that any of us, if we would truly look at and listen to the voices of people in pain, the voices of people who have been oppressed or mistreated, we would be moved to help, to serve, to give. We’d be moved to change our lifestyle, to scale back our standard of living. The cause of injustice, I’d like to believe, is not that most of us are evil, greedy, selfish beings ... but only that we are blind to each others’ experience.\n
There is power in a name. Ten years ago, the people organizing a coalition of churches, synagogues, and mosques to work for social justice chose the name “Tying Nashville Together.” The basic concept was to help people see and understand each others’ experience ... that justice would flow from better understanding, from better relationships. One of the first things TNT did was called a “Neighborhood Walk Audit.” They gathered several groups of people to walk around neighborhoods carrying clipboards, noting things like abandoned cars, boarded up houses, trash in alleys ... anything that detracts from the quality of life. One of these groups might include 2 people who live in Belle Meade, 2 who live in the James Cayce Homes, 1 from Donelson, 1 from Bordeaux. They’d walk through each others’ neighborhoods. Think about it ... people from the projects walking up and down the streets of Belle Meade with clipboard in hand,
noting anything that was a public nuisance. Then they all get in the van and drive over to East Nashville to do the same thing. Do you think anyone had an eye-opening experience? After making friends with the people you are walking around with, you start to care about their life. You start to get mad about things that don’t seem right. Before, it was just how the world works. Now, it’s personal. Now, it’s a friend and now you care. That’s the goal of Tying Nashville Together. I’d like to think that if the rich man and Lazarus had gone for a walk together things might have turned out different for both of them.

In Micah chapter 6, God chastises the people for missing the whole point of religion. It’s amazing what has been done in the name of religion, in the name of trying to please God. I don’t know whether it’s comforting or depressing to realize that for over 3000 years people have been misusing religion, misunderstanding what God wants. Some slaughtered animals. Some started wars. Some use it to fight with their in-laws. Some people even sacrificed children ... giving their firstborn child to show their devotion to God. Lunacy, says Micah. What does God want? What would make God happy? Not some elaborate religious ceremony, says Micah. God doesn’t care about how we worship ... whether we have organs or praise bands, whether we have fancy or plain buildings, whether we baptize by dunking or sprinkling. Maybe it doesn’t even matter what you believe. None of that is really essential to religion. What matters is simple: Do justice, Love kindness, walk humbly with God.

Micah 6:8 is one of the most famous phrases in the Bible: “What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” Familiar as the passage is, it’s worth looking a little deeper. First, Micah says to “DO” justice. Justice is something you do, not something you believe. James Limburg said: “To do justice means to work for the establishment of equity for all, especially for the powerless.” It does not do any good to “believe” in justice ... it only helps if we DO justice. Second, to “love kindness” means more than just being nice to people. The Hebrew word hesed means love with a strong element of loyalty. Deep love for your fellow children of God. Third, “walk humbly” is less about humility and more about being careful to walk with God – that our daily life should reflect our deep loyalty to the ways of God. One scholar notes that the call to ‘walk’ is similar to the message of Jesus, who most typically invited people not by saying ‘believe,’ but rather ‘walk,’ or ‘follow me.’

Whenever we read stories, whether from the Bible or anywhere, we have a tendency to identify with one of the characters. You might have identified with the rich man ... plenty to eat, walking by homeless and hurting people without really paying attention. You might have identified with Lazarus, a poor man who seems to have nothing compared with others. One of the most important ways to read the Bible is to imagine being each one. What do you feel like if
you are the rich man? You like your life. Or you got plenty of problems and stresses, even if you do eat well. You don’t want to be made to feel guilty about poor people -- hey, you work hard for your living. Then imagine you are Lazarus. Misery. Despair. Hopelessness. But then things get reversed after they die. What does that mean? If you can imagine your way into both of those characters, you’ll find some spiritual growth.

The parable is tricky, however, because maybe Jesus wants us to identify with someone else – the rich man’s brothers. The rich man, knowing it is too late to save himself, begs Father Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers. Abraham says no: they have Moses and the prophets ... prophets like Micah. That should be enough. Incredibly, Jesus is telling the rich man that the Jewish scriptures were plenty clear about how to live with justice, and that if people don’t get it from Moses and Micah they won’t even get it if someone comes back from the dead. Coming from the lips of Jesus, that’s a pretty powerful message that true religion is about doing justice.

“Our vision is to be a church with a passion for justice.” When we say a passion for justice, we are not talking about getting even with people, but about a deep, fervent, and enduring desire for the well-being of all people – a commitment to the belief that society is judged not on the advancements of the few, but on the well-being of the least. PASSION means to work hard to find opportunities to walk in other shoes, to understand the lives of others, and then to take our insights and work for justice. Passion means to examine all aspects of our lives and relationships and see if they are life-affirming for all people. Our vision is to be a church with a passion for justice.

We are the rich man’s brothers ... we’ve got Moses, the prophets, and someone who came back from the dead. They all teach us to do justice, to love others, to walk with God. In the words of another: “Did the brothers ever get the message? We are not told, for that is the question the parable leaves US to answer. Each of us will write our own ending to the story.”

Amen.