

The Lessons Appointed for Use on the
Sunday closest to November 2

Year A
Proper 26
RCL



Micah 3:5-12
Psalm 43
Matthew 23:1-12

The Collect

Almighty and merciful God, it is only by your gift that your faithful people offer you true and laudable service: Grant that we may run without stumbling to obtain your heavenly promises; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Micah 3:5-12

Thus says the LORD concerning the prophets
who lead my people astray,

who cry “Peace”
when they have something to eat,

but declare war against those
who put nothing into their mouths.

Therefore it shall be night to you, without vision,
and darkness to you, without revelation.

The sun shall go down upon the prophets,
and the day shall be black over them;

the seers shall be disgraced,
and the diviners put to shame;

they shall all cover their lips,
for there is no answer from God.

But as for me, I am filled with power,
with the spirit of the Lord,
and with justice and might,

to declare to Jacob his transgression

and to Israel his sin.

Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob
and chiefs of the house of Israel,
who abhor justice
and pervert all equity,

who build Zion with blood
and Jerusalem with wrong!

Its rulers give judgment for a bribe,
its priests teach for a price,
its prophets give oracles for money;
yet they lean upon the LORD and say,
“Surely the LORD is with us!
No harm shall come upon us.”

Therefore because of you
Zion shall be plowed as a field;

Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins,
and the mountain of the house a wooded height.

Psalm 43 Page 644, BCP

Judica me, Deus

- 1 Give judgment for me, O God, and defend my cause against an ungodly people; deliver me from the deceitful and the wicked.
- 2 For you are the God of my strength; why have you put me from you? And why do I go so heavily while the enemy oppresses me?
- 3 Send out your light and your truth, that they may lead me, and bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling;
- 4 That I may go to the altar of God, to the God of my joy and gladness; and on the harp I will give thanks to you, O God my God.
- 5 Why are you so full of heaviness, O my soul? And why are you so disquieted within me?
- 6 Put your trust in God; for I will yet give thanks to him, who is the help of my countenance, and my God.

Matthew 23:1-12

Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father — the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

SERMON

There's a famous Jewish story about Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur is a very solemn day for Jews. It is the Day of Atonement, the day that Jews bring before God their sins for the last year, confess that they have failed God, and ask to be sealed in the book of life for a good year ahead. On one Yom Kippur, the rabbi rose formally before the congregation, tore his garments and shouted, "Lord! I am nothing!"

Next the president of the Synagogue rose, rent his garments and confessed, "Lord! I am nothing!"

To everyone's surprise, the lowly little beadle then went to the front, rent his garments and shouted, "Lord! I am nothing."

The president elbowed the rabbi and pointed at the janitor, "Ha! Look who thinks he's nothing!"

Religious pride. We all have a touch of it. It's the

feeling that because of our secular position in society, or our accomplishments, or all we do for the church that we are blessed by God for our activities. It's another way of thinking we can win our own salvation.

For the past few Sundays we have been following Matthew's dispute accounts between Jesus and the religious authorities of the time, taking place in the Temple. Jesus can be awfully hard on people in the religious life, and that's hard for them to accept. Jesus, it has to be remembered, is nobody from nowhere. He has no part in the Temple. He has no part in the administration of the government. He has no bone fides, no diploma, no Levite connection. He's not a kohan, (that is, a priest) nor a rabbi in a synagogue. Those who are confronting him are all of these. They've dedicated their lives to religious life, and because they have worked so hard, they take ownership of their position. In a very human

sort of way, they are proud of their accomplishment, and protective of it. Well, who could blame them. Wouldn't you?

Without earthly credentials Jesus is the natural target for those who see themselves as the guardians of orthodox worship. He has answered all their trick questions, silenced the Sadducees, trapped the Pharisees, disputed with the lawyer. Now it is Jesus' time to address spiritual pride with the crowd and his disciples. His dispute isn't that the teachings of the leaders are false. He agrees they are teaching God's law correctly. His dispute is that they themselves fail to follow the teachings they impose on everyone else. Those he is being critical of are seeking the acclaim of their peers through public displays of piety, but refuse to do the hard work that God has laid before them. It is a scathing attack, and one that resonates with our current time when the

church is much more likely to be seen in the papers in the context of someone in the church doing something terribly wrong than it is to be seen in the papers doing something right.

It's a big problem for preachers everywhere. A colleague of mine often said that he was uneasy when people complimented a sermon because if he took credit, then it wasn't the word of God, and if it was the word of God he spoke, he couldn't take credit for it. Yet, he was sure his congregation would think poorly of him if he claimed to speak for God – nobody likes a prophet. Mostly, he just blushed. This is one of the reasons many of us involve ourselves so thoroughly in the business end of running a church. That's easier than undertaking to speak for God by a long shot and if you put together a really good committee structure, or start a really effective youth program, you CAN take credit for that, so

there's a very human tendency to focus our attention on that which will bring us acclaim.

I know this because my one and only gift is to spin tales to you in the hope that by doing so I am throwing light upon the Gospel. I confess to you that, since that seems to be my only gift, sometimes I'm tormented by the thought that if I do that well, that's all that God requires of me. Of course, that is entirely wrong and I know it. Still, it is very human. We all want to feel we are doing what we do well, and that others appreciate it.

I was watching something on TV about the Catholic Church the other night. There was an appearance by the Pope in St. Paul's Basilica. After the Pope entered, two Cardinals assisted him to his throne and folded and arranged his vestments after he was seated. The Cardinals performed their duties with great care, folding the vestments just so. What would have happened, I wonder, if

the beadle from our story had tried to help with the vestments? Would one Cardinal have elbowed the other and said, “Look who thinks HE can fold a vestment”?

I’ve looked the Scriptures over carefully. Nowhere do I find the word of God directing us to fold the Pope’s vestments, yet that job and the countless others that are involved in keeping a church going have to be done. Since they HAVE to be done, the temptation is to focus on these, more manageable, tasks at the expense of the more difficult spiritual tasks that we are really supposed to be tending to. In other words, if you are up to your [PAUSE] waist in alligators, it’s sometimes hard to remember that your objective was to drain the swamp. We allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by the secular aspects of the job, and neglect the spiritual tasks which are really our only important jobs.

We do what we do, not as an end unto itself, but in

obedience to God's command to love God with all our heart and all our might and all our strength, and to love our neighbor as ourself. Those in the dispute texts we have been reading who fancied that they are holier than Jesus had lost sight of that underlying objective. They thought their teaching and their grasp of Jewish law was all God required of them. Jesus reminded them that opening their hearts to let God empower them to love His creation as He does is our only real task. God works through the church to change hearts, one by one.

Unfortunately, we're a stiff-necked people. If we're faced with an alternative between doing what we know God would have us do at great expense to ourselves, or refusing to do so to our great remorse, we're very likely to search about for a third course which we can undertake and which will restore our feelings of self-worth. We go and find a Pope and fold his robe, in other words.

We invent easier paths to follow.

Seven hundred and fifty years before Jesus, the prophet Micah looked about him and brought the word of God to the prophets who were wrongly advising the leaders of the people of the southern kingdom.

Thus says the LORD concerning the prophets
who lead my people astray,
who cry “Peace”
when they have something to eat,
but declare war against those
who put nothing into their mouths.

I said nobody likes a prophet, and it is true. Prophets always speak in opposition to the status quo. How often can you find an Old Testament prophet declaring, “Great job! Just what I wanted. Take a couple weeks off and treat yourself to a trip to Disneyland on me”? It is a prophet’s job to speak the word of God to the imperfect structures we create, to say to the establishment, “I

don't care what the Pope's robe looks like. My children are starving." Regrettably, if you're dependent on your position as a prophet, you're likely to ignore the voice of God and tell those paying the freight what they want to hear. When you do that, you stop being a prophet, and that is the consequence of their action which Micah reports.

Therefore it shall be night to you, without vision,
and darkness to you, without revelation.

Those prophets who have lost sight of the objective and substituted for it public displays of piety, who have not trusted God to make to them the gift of love we spoke about last Sunday, will be cut off from the word of God. That's not good news if you're heavily invested in the prophet business, but really it's terrible news for anyone. If we can't do it by ourselves, and if, by our

lack of trust in God, we fail to take the opportunities to refocus our lives that God gives us, then we have cut ourselves off from the Gospel path the life and death of Jesus showed us.

What would a Gospel centered path look like in 21st Century America? This is where I speak as a prophet, and make you mad. Nobody likes a prophet. ABC News this week reported that over the last 30 years, the income of the richest 1% of the population nearly tripled while the poorest people got poorer¹. The poverty rate in 2010 was the highest poverty rate since 1993². A rising tide lifts all boats, but over the last three decades, we haven't been creating wealth — we've been consolidating it.

Set aside the arguments about socialism and wealth redistribution and the rest of the political noise we hear.

¹ The National Poverty Center reports, that in 2010, 15.1 percent of all persons lived in poverty.

² See also <http://www.census.gov/prod/2011pubs/p60-239.pdf>

Disregard everything you know about the proper way to fold the Pope's vestments and ask yourself: is this an acceptable situation in the richest country the world has ever known? Is it the Gospel path Jesus trod to have the rich get richer and the poor get poorer? I'm not speaking of how we might address this. That's a political question. I'm asking you to evaluate the direction this country has gone in the last three decades and to measure it against the Great Commandments that Jesus gave. What do you think?

Kathy's favorite book is "A Christmas Carol" by Charles Dickens. As the story opens, Scrooge has been visited by two men who wish him to make a charitable gift. Scrooge asks after the poor houses and the treadmill, then in his spiritual pride, his certainty in his own righteousness, he refuses to donate, telling them:

"I don't make merry myself at Christmas and I

can't afford to make idle people merry. I help to support the establishments I have mentioned — they cost enough; and those who are badly off must go there.”

“Many can't go there; and many would rather die.”

“If they would rather die,” said Scrooge, “they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population. Besides — excuse me — I don't know that.”

“But you might know it,” observed the gentleman.

“It's not my business,” Scrooge returned. “It's enough for a man to understand his own business, and not to interfere with other people's. Mine occupies me constantly. Good afternoon, gentlemen!”

Contrast these heartless words with the repentant words of Marley's ghost:

Business! Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were all my busi-

ness. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!

Over and over again, from Micah and Amos to Jesus himself God's words ring loudly, "Treat my children with love. You who speak with full mouths, make the suffering of my children your business." God's church has inherited the prophetic role, to speak the word of God truthfully, and courageously. If the church involves itself in folding the Pope's vestments and does not speak the prophetic word, who will? God's church cannot be the spokesman for the status quo but must be the advocate for the kingdom.

In 15th century Romania, the ruler of Wallachia ended sickness and poverty in his province. He invited the poor and sick to a dinner, locked the doors and set fire to the place. The ruler's name was Vlad Tepes, but you

may know him by his patronymic, Dracula. When our spiritual pride tell us that the sick and the poor are that way because they are lazy or druggies or drunks and we declare war on them, we are locking them in a room where we can no longer see their suffering, then setting the place on fire.

Mankind is our business. The common welfare is our business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, are all our business. Reading the Bible is good. Attending church is good. Memorizing the Bible is good, but if your reading and singing and attendance and praying does not open your heart to the gift of love your Father is offering so that you may see His children through the eyes of His Love, you might as well memorize the cross-word puzzle. No matter how the Pope's vestments lay, the original intent is to change your heart so that you see the suffering of others through the eyes

of God's compassion and act upon it.

AMEN

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