

The Sunday Missive – November 5, 2023 The Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost

Hymn 423 Immortal, invisible God only wise

Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
in light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
almighty, victorious, thy great Name we praise.

Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light,
nor wanting, nor wasting, thou rulest in might;
thy justice like mountains high soaring above
thy clouds, which are fountains of goodness and love.

To all life thou givest, to both great and small;
in all life thou livest, the true life of all;
we blossom and flourish, like leaves on the tree,
then wither and perish; but nought changeth thee.

Thou reignest in glory, thou rulest in light,
thine angels adore thee, all veiling their sight;
all laud we would render: O help us to see
'tis only the splendor of light hideth thee.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zd0FyrzVUCM>

The Collect of the Day

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

Give judgment for me, O God; defend my cause against the ungodly*
Deliver me from the deceitful and the wicked.

For you are the God of my strength; why have you put me from you*
Why do I go so heavily while the enemy oppresses me?

Send out your light and your truth, that they may lead me* ***Bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling;***

That I may go to the altar of God, the God of my joy and gladness* ***On the harp and the lyre I will give thanks to you, O my God.***

Why are you so full of heaviness, O my soul* ***Why are you so disquieted within me?***

I will yet give thanks to the Lord* ***Who is the help of my countenance, and my God***

1 Thessalonians 2:9-13

You remember our labor and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and God also, how pure, upright, and blameless our conduct was toward you believers. As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children, urging and encouraging you and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers.

Lift Every Voice and Sing Hymn 227 We shall overcome

We shall overcome, we shall overcome,
We shall overcome some day;
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe, we shall overcome some day.

We'll walk hand in hand, we'll walk hand in hand,
We'll walk hand in hand today;
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe, we'll walk hand in hand today.

We shall live in peace, we shall live in peace,
We shall live in peace someday;
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe, we shall live in peace some day.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Aor6-DkzBJ0>

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."

Do What I Say -- Proper 26A

As a teenager, I collected a number of things my mother said I swore I would never say to my children. Things like, "You're not leaving this house wearing that!" or "Don't look at me like that!" or "Wait Daddy gets home!" That last one was pretty easy. At the top of the list – along with "Stop yelling!!" was one that irked me the most, because it was the sort of quintessential hypocrisy teenagers love to catch their parents spouting. I don't recall an exact occasion, or what behavior of hers prompted such an outburst, but I can still hear her exasperated voice, with full conviction and no hint of irony declaiming "Don't do what I do, do what I say!"

"Don't do what I do, do what I say!" Upon hearing that phrase, what teenager or anybody else can pass up the opportunity, to claim – at least to themselves -- a great moral victory: "Aha!" Oh, the indignation, the outrage at the clear evidence that my Mom would dare to hold me to a standard of behavior that she couldn't even claim herself. "You are just as bad as I am, or worse!"

Yes, what goes around comes around. When I became a man, I gave up some of my childish things, and started noticing my own proclivity, once I had kids of my own, to try controlling them with some of the very same exasperated outbursts to which I swore I'd never resort.

And of course, I had the same feelings that drove my Mom to say those things: frustration with disobedience, recalcitrance and mayhem. She wanted peace in the house, and time to do what she wanted to do with her life apart from wrangling us, but she also had hopes and intentions for the kind of folks she wanted us to become, and to which we seemed, betimes, to bear no resemblance whatever. I came to understand all too well the reality she faced when demanding that we do as she said, not as she did: it is painfully difficult to live into our ideals, to practice what we preach. As grandparenthood approaches, seemingly as unstoppable as the tide, the challenge to be authentic, consistent and self-aware only grows more poignant.

That reality is the most glaring element of Jesus' criticism of the scribes and Pharisees in today's story from Matthew. "The scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; so, do whatever they teach you, but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach," Jesus says to his people, before explaining some of the many ways their behavior runs counter to their words.

Jesus has called out the scribes and Pharisees for hypocrisy before; it is one of his most prominent themes. He liked to criticize them, not because they were so horrible, and not because he wanted the people to renounce their true religion – more than once he insisted that the law was something he fully supported. He picked on them because they were human beings, fallible human beings, who claimed to be otherwise. They claimed the high moral ground, the badge and authority of righteousness, while in their lives they failed to even approach the righteousness they claimed to embody. They fell far short of the ideals they claimed to inhabit.

If Jesus were here today, what would he think of our society? What would he call us out on? What possible improvement would he identify in us, by comparison with those he tore into then?

Those of us in congregations with precious liturgical traditions can surely identify with the Pharisees' worries about fringes and phylacteries, their titles and proper address--I myself witness Episcopalian clergy oo-ing and ah-ing over each other's beautiful

vestments when we get together in person, with good reason: it is a marvelous sight. But debating whether we should be addressed as "Father" or "Mother" or "Reverend" in order to have our authority respected? No thanks. Thank goodness when we have leadership who don't take themselves so mightily.

Even those whose traditions are more stoic and reserved are not able to avoid to such rabbit holes, with their preaching gowns and collar tabs, chancel vestments and velvety choir robes, and some of the elaborate furniture in their sanctuaries for proper baptistery and liturgy. There's a thin line between sanctity and sanctimony. And who would avoid a mention in the local papers if it's good publicity for the church? Not we!

The resemblance to the scribes and Pharisees can get disturbingly close if we're not attentive to our true purpose as followers of Jesus.

Of course, the problem actually goes much deeper than what we wear or what we're called. Phylacteries and fringes, vestments and titles all have their place when kept in perspective. Jesus' concern, then and now, is the way those things get out of perspective, the way our motivations for doing them become distorted so that they become an end in themselves, the way they become substitutes for what we are really about: glorifying God and living as disciples.

If human nature made it hard for the scribes and Pharisees to keep their motives pure, to practice what they preached, we in the 21st century church are perhaps even more disadvantaged. We still have the same human nature, and we are living in a culture that values appearances, status, wealth, position, individualism, and consumerism. Couple this with the fact that the role of the church in society is greatly diminished, and it's no wonder that our tendency to do things to make ourselves stand out--as individuals and as an institution--can make us forget why we're Christians, can lead us away from the kind of discipleship Jesus is calling us to.

Because discipleship has nothing to do with standing out, with being self-serving, or putting ourselves first; quite the contrary--we, all of us, are called not to be served but to serve. Jesus continually reminded whoever would listen that "the greatest among you will be your

servant" and "those who exalt themselves will be humbled" and vice-versa

So, we are forging our existence as Christians between what the gospel calls us to and what our culture shrilly demands, and so often find ourselves in the same bind as the Pharisees, the bind my Mom and I experienced when we blurted out, "Do what I say, not what I do." There is only one antidote for this ailment, and that is God's grace, compounded in community.

God's grace for us means that no matter how much we tend to walk out of church leaving bits and pieces of our discipleship behind, God offers us yet another opportunity to live more fully into our calling as servant leaders. No matter how often we act in self-serving ways, we will be given more chances to serve others. No matter how we fail to practice what we preach, God's grace is still there for us, still ready to hold, comfort and sustain us. There will always be another chance to get it right.

Let us pray:

Ever loving God, who has called us together as servants in your church, grant us wisdom, self-mastery and pure devotion as we order our life together, that we may live as Christ's body on earth, remembering others' needs before our own, and always seeking your will. Teach us, O God, to love what is good, to resist what is evil, and to fear only the loss of you, so that we might enter your kingdom where love and mercy reign; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Hymn 437 Tell out my soul the greatness of the Lord

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!
Unnumbered blessings give my spirit voice;
tender to me the promise of his word;
in God my Savior shall my heart rejoice.

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his Name!
Make known his might, the deeds his arm has done;

his mercy sure, from age to age the same;
his holy Name— the Lord, the Mighty One.

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his might!
Powers and dominions lay their glory by.
Proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to flight,
the hungry fed, the humble lifted high.

Tell out, my soul, the glories of his word!
Firm is his promise, and his mercy sure.
Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord
to children's children and for evermore!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s6ji4y9Q-K0&t=25s>

A Thin Flake of Fire

For all the great thoughts I have read
For all the deep books I have studied
None has brought me nearer to Spirit
Than a walk beneath shimmering leaves

Golden red with the fire of autumn
When the air is crisp
And the sun a pale eye, watching.

I am a scholar of the senses
A theologian of the tangible.

Spirit touches me and I touch Spirit
Each time I lift a leaf from my path
A thin flake of fire golden red
Still warm from the breath that made it.

Steven Charleston