

Micah 3:5-12

⁵Thus 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. ⁶Therefore 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; ⁷the seers shall be disgraced, and the diviners put to shame; they shall all cover their lips, for there is no answer from God.

⁸But 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. ⁹Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob and chiefs of the house of Israel, who abhor justice and pervert all equity, ¹⁰who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with wrong! ¹¹Its 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.” ¹²Therefore 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.

Matthew 23:1-15, 23-26

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, ²“The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; ³therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. ⁴They 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. ⁵They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. ⁶They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, ⁷and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. ⁸But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. ⁹And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. ¹⁰Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. ¹¹The greatest among you will be your servant. ¹²All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

¹³“But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them. ¹⁵Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves. ²³“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. ²⁴You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel! ²⁵“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. ²⁶You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may become clean.

Acting the Part?

November 5, 2017

We’ve been on quite a journey with Jesus and the religious leaders over the last few weeks, haven’t we? They have been challenging him, and he, in turn, has challenged them right back. He has done so with very pointed questions as well as parables to make us all think a little deeper about how we live as God’s children and shepherds in the world. Today, however, Jesus drops all pretense and all allegory and gets right to the truth about his elders in ministry. He clearly calls them out for acting the part of being holy while seeking to gain attention for themselves rather than serve in humility. And there are several more, “Woe to You!” passages that I didn’t read this morning that emphasize just how foolish they have been. And points out to me, that we often

get caught up in our own importance, don't we? I guess it is just human nature to want to be the center of attention and even the disciples were not immune to the temptation to do so.

Our reading today reminds me of the many professors and college presidents I have known. And one of the things you notice immediately upon walking into a professor's or college president's or doctor's office is that somewhere on the wall will be several framed documents letting you know where they went to school or what awards they have received. We often refer to it as, The Wall of Fame. Some folks go all out on this and have walls covered with plaques and diplomas. I certainly had my fair share of them as well. My two diplomas from Appalachian State, my National Association of Teachers of Singing certificate, my awards, and plaques for Summer Theatre and shows I've directed. Most of these now lie in a box somewhere and may never be seen again.

But the one award that I still keep on the wall is one that I never expected to receive and came as a complete surprise. Lees-McRae College was founded by a young Presbyterian minister by the name of Edgar Tufts. He accomplished incredible things for the mountain communities and in his short life-time he founded several churches, a school for boys and girls which later became Lees-McRae College, a hospital, and a home for orphaned children. He was a remarkable servant of God and the college presents an award in his name each year to two deserving recipients.

The name of the award is The Edgar Tufts Humanitarian Service Award. I remember clearly the moment they announced the name of my dear friend and colleague Kacy Crabtree and I thought, "there couldn't be a worthier person to receive this award." I was running sound at the time and was fully focused on my duties when they called my name. I was stunned to tell you the truth because I was sure I had done nothing to deserve this award. I was deeply honored, and mostly, because I was considered along with my good friend, who to this day still amazes me with her life of service. I suppose if I were to follow Jesus' expectation that I not brag about this, that I should put this award under a bushel somewhere. But I keep it out to remind me that a life of service, whether you get an award or not, is what holy living is all about. I hope I can continue to live into it because the last thing I want to hear from Jesus later is, "Woe to you!"

And we have to remember that identity is part of what is happening here. By the time Matthew writes his gospel the Temple had been destroyed, and that one physical building brought a lot of identity to the Jewish people. Can you imagine if your church was destroyed and burnt to the ground and you had to go somewhere else? Suddenly there are priests and Pharisees, elders and teachers, who have no temple to serve and the Jewish community has been dispersed all over the known country. And wearing the religious regalia that Jews are supposed to wear gives them a sense of identity in the world and within their own community. There is nothing inherently wrong with that. But when we use these things to gain power and influence over others, when we use religious rank to gain special privilege, when we act 'religious' but have unloving hearts and actions, well you can bet Jesus is going to call you on that.

Now I couldn't help but smile a little that this passage comes at the same time as Halloween. A time when we take particular delight in pretending to be something or someone else. All last week, as we got closer and closer to Halloween, I saw numerous posts on Facebook of children posing in their Halloween costumes. Many of my former students who now have children were excitedly posting pictures of not only their children but of themselves. I saw kids disguised as the Incredible Hulk, Han Solo, ghosts, Princesses Elsa or Anna from Frozen, La-La from Teletubbies, Frankenstein, Ninjas, Cats and Dogs, Hobos, Superman, Zombies, Soldiers, Nurses, Witches, and my favorite, of course, were my own grandchildren.

These are just the Kids costumes. I won't mention my adult friends and members of the church who had good costumes as well. One in particular that I loved, however, was a couple dressed as bacon and eggs. You'll have

to try and picture that one. And isn't it interesting that when we put on a costume or mask or a funny hat we suddenly act a little goofy? That's just what a costume does for you when you put it on. It brings with it a life of its own which we who have been on stage are quite familiar with.

And it's fun to pretend, isn't it? We all love to play or at least we did at one point in our lives. But in our very adult world we have a different type of pretending, don't we? The costumes we wear now are different. We put on clothing that tells people who we are or who we want to be. We wear power clothing to project power and confidence. We wear clothing that identifies us with certain groups of people. We wear clothing to attract others, sometimes a good thing and sometimes not. We wear clothing to let the world around us know that we care about sustainability and economy, choosing to wear things out, rather than buy new. We wear makeup and style our hair in certain ways, (at least those who have hair). We disguise ourselves to fit in or to stand out or to be...invisible. We are 'posers' as the saying goes, and we dare not let the world see who we really are. We all wear masks and costumes and the religious leaders that Jesus is talking about today did the same.

Now Jesus wants to make clear that these religious leaders know the truth. They sit on Moses' seat which is Matthew's way of reminding the reader that they have religious authority. This is a place of honor. This is why Jesus says, "Follow what they teach, but don't do what they do!" It reminds me of that *Peanuts* comic strip that had Snoopy on top of his doghouse with a flock of baby birds. The time had come for the baby birds to learn how to fly, and Snoopy was their teacher. Snoopy flapped his ears and walked to the end of the roof of the doghouse. He leaped into the air and continued to flap his ears. Unfortunately, he landed right on his head. He got back up onto the roof and shared this lesson: "Do as I say to do and not what I do." Something we probably heard from our parents at one time or another too. I know I did.

And Jesus finds himself addressing the biggest posers of all today and he isn't just talking to them. He is talking to us as well. And maybe more specifically he is talking to those who find themselves in leadership and service to God's people. I'm looking in the mirror as I say that!

He tells his disciple in front of the crowds, where most likely the Pharisees could hear, that they are Hypocrites! Hypocrites!! They say one thing but do another. They don't practice what they teach, or as we like to say, they don't practice what they preach. They strut and show off their robes and fringes and phylacteries and expect to be treated with respect and given the best seats at the World Series. Hypocrites!

Now you don't have to look very far in the definitions book to find that the English word, "hypocrite," comes from the Greek word, "hypocresis" which is the Greek word for "actor." A good "hypocresis" is a good actor.

But the heart of what Jesus is saying, I think, is that these Pharisees are acting the part...they are not becoming the part...they are wearing masks that hide who they really are, and they use their positions as teachers and holders of the sacred Law not to serve, but to be served. And one only has to watch the news to see religious leaders of our own day doing the same. There are a whole lot of 'Poser Pastors' out there who want you to send them money, so you will be blessed, and they can drive fancy cars!

And I think what we have to consider today is, are we practicing what we preach? Am I? Are we taking the words of Jesus seriously that "The greatest among you will be your servant?" Or are we too, just posing? Are we choosing to be religious and not loving? Are we excluding or including? Are we as individuals or as a church wearing masks that make us hypocrites? Does the neighborhood and community think we are genuine in our love for them? Are we placing burdens on them or lifting them up? Would Jesus perhaps be turning his attention to us today with this condemnation? Are long robes and fringes and front row seats more important than justice and compassion, or helping and serving?

There is a story of a little boy who attended Church with his Grandfather one Sunday. Grandpa's church had beautiful stained-glass windows. Grandpa told his grandson that the windows contained pictures of Saint Matthew, Saint Mark, Saint Luke, Saint John, Saint Paul, and a whole lot of other saints. When he got home, the boy told Mom and Dad all about it. Dad, wanting to be funny and curious about what his son had learned, asked, "What is a saint?" The boy thought for a minute and then replied, "A saint is somebody the light shines through."

Can I encourage you and I to take off our masks and let the light of God shine through today? It's already there...right there in your heart. God is in us and around us and through us. There is nothing that can separate you from his love. You are the light of the world. You don't have to pretend to be anything other than who you are. And as you come to the table this morning Jesus invites you to take off the many masks and robes that define you and lay them here at His feet. Lay down your illusions, your judgments, both about yourself and others, and any sense of self-importance, and clothe yourselves in his image. Wear the mask and clothing of true servanthood and be filled with Christ' holy presence as you take within you the bread and the cup. Let us pray.