

Sunday, November 5, 2023
Micah 3:5-12, Matthew 23:1-12
“Leaving a Legacy”
The Rev. Joan Withers Priest, preaching

Who was your favorite teacher growing up and why? Mine? Mr. Sidney Townsend was mine. Mr. Sidney Townsend was my high school orchestra teacher. He was a wiry short round guy with more energy than most first graders and I loved him. I was never a very good violin player with my long fingers and curved spine, but I used to love to play in that High School Orchestra. Why? Mr. Townsend. He always made you feel special, a significant part of the group; giving us confidence and pride at a time when most of us had very little, and actually made being in the Orchestra – the Orchestra! - a popular place to be. I know, amazing! He made learning fun – by teaching us classical, modern and sometimes ridiculous pieces of music. And we played for children in elementary schools, in people’s homes in small quartets, and for every musical – even though I couldn’t be THE Fiddler on the Roof, it was still fun. One day he let us listen to his jazz group, a bunch of middle-aged men jamming away, and we were amazed as he played Electric Bass Guitar better than I have ever seen anyone play before or since. Music permeated his entire life. Who was your favorite teacher and why?

I wonder if most teachers realize how much influence they can have, good and bad, over their students. They have the power to create, change and open up new worlds to their students. Good teachers are those who have the heart and mind that wants to engage their students, who love what they are teaching and **who** they are teaching. Who live what they teach and believe what they teach. Bad teachers, on the other hand, have the power to hurt, damage and destroy the minds and hearts of their students. Who was your least favorite teacher and why?

I remember one year when my son had a terrible teacher. I arranged a meeting with the teacher and the Assistant Principal. I was terrified because I was not one of those moms who complains all the time or schedules meetings all the time, I had **never** done this before. And I remember my hands shaking as I told this teacher that my son was actually afraid of her, frightened of her and her screaming all day long at her students. How he was having nightmares, cried each day and begged to stay home from school. I’m not sure if she heard me or not, because she kept saying how nice my son was, but I will tell you, the next year she was no longer at that school.

Well, as we continue to move through the Gospel of Matthew, it’s coming to the end of Jesus’ ministry and he has traveled all over the countryside, teaching, healing, preaching, and is now in the city of Jerusalem. He has cleansed the Temple, told them parables, answered religious authorities their **many** questions. He has been questioned and criticized so much by the Scribes and Pharisees that he begins to teach himself, to the crowds and to the disciples. This passage is his final response to the pressure he’s been receiving throughout his stay.

He begins to describe a new church, a place filled with a forgiving community of faith, a place of learning, where people are learning how to serve and whom to serve. It’s important to point out that Jesus agrees with the teaching of the leaders present in the Temple, with the content of their lessons, he wasn’t opposed to the law, he upheld the Jewish norms and ideals; he just extended their meaning to include mercy and love and the importance of one’s

relationship with God and with one another. He wasn't against their teaching, he just disagreed with the way they lived out these lessons, the way the leaders of his time carried out the fulfillment of the law. And in this passage, Jesus, whom Matthew describes as the best teacher, tells us two important things about what makes a good teacher and how to be a good student. So let's explore these this morning.

First, good teachers need to be authentic, living lives according to the precepts they teach. What is it they say, if you are going to talk the talk, then you had better walk the walk, practice what you preach, don't be all mouth and no trousers - couldn't resist that one from the UK, they like that one better than our versions. Don't be all mouth and no trousers.

Today is a day many denominations recognize as All Saints Sunday, the day we celebrate the great cloud of witnesses who have shaped, molded and taught us. Now most of us think of saints as far above and beyond us – inapproachable, braver, smarter, self-less like Mother Teresa, martyrs like Saint Paul, virtuous like Saint Francis of Assisi. But in all actuality, a saint, a saint is, according to the dictionary definition, simply a particularly good person who is exceptionally kind and patient. That sure seems a lot easier to aspire to me!

And I'll bet a lot of those who are listed on our All-Saints list are also not perfect, but most have taught us important lessons in life. Jesus tells us God is our teacher and we are his students, and our time of studying and learning and journeying together never ends. The story of the Dunns Corner Community Church and your story continues with a new vision, an on-going ministry of love and reconciliation, a legacy of faith you are all called to continue, Saints and Sinners alike. Even during this time of transition and searching for a new leader, you are still a church community, students of God.

Second, Jesus teaches us is that authentic teachers do not promote their own status. Back at the time of Jesus, those religious leaders appeared loving and faithful and pious in their speech, but they were all show. Not only did they purposefully have robes made which stood out, fringe that dragged on the ground behind them, they made phylacteries. You know what phylacteries are? Me, neither, I had to look it up.

They were scrolls made of parchment which contained four paragraphs of the law, and these were worn on their foreheads and left arms. Huge scrolls. And they were always in the rows set apart in the very front of the synagogue so that the entire congregation had full view of them. So important, so holy. But what they really were, were wolves in sheep's clothing. They had been known to assist the people with their financial affairs, but they told the people, especially the poor widows, that there was no higher duty than to give money to the scribes, in fact, it would entitle them to a higher place in the heavenly realm. Taking from the poor to serve themselves!

Here, Jesus presents a clear warning for teachers, all people against the desire for prominence, reverence, and self-enhancement in the church and everywhere. Jesus applauded keeping the law, God's law as we heard last week, loving God, neighbor and self; but they didn't actually love like this. They did not exercise mercy. They only sought their own gain, their own power.

The prophet Micah writes about this same kind of leadership. He lashes out against the prophets who prefer the wealthy over the poor, who preferred special treatment, who were leading people astray from hearing the word of God. Rulers who were ruling for bribes, priests

who were teaching for a fee, prophets who were performing their duty for money, and he preaches of the sheer injustice of it all.

But let's get real for just a moment. If we are honest with ourselves, truly honest, we can relate a little bit to those scribes. We all want the best seats in the house. We all act in ways to impress others. We all enjoy something nice said about us, our picture hung in some place of honor, our name up in lights, an award given in our name. Maybe not a half page article in the local newspaper – so embarrassing! While we all admit, if we are honest, that we enjoy being honored, it shouldn't be the reason behind our actions, especially in the church.

Jesus is saying here that there is something more important than honor, prestige and prominence; and that is leaving a legacy. It's about how people will remember us, how we showed our love of others, how we taught what we believed, how we chose to live; not how we made a living, but how we lived a life. In everything we do each day, does it point to God enough to leave a mark on things, do we make that kind of offering, living each and every day, making it quite obvious that we are a disciple of Christ, and leave that kind of legacy?

Most of you don't volunteer your time here, ushering, serving coffee, teaching, singing, listening; to receive your name on a fancy "thank you" note in the Monthly Scrobe or attend a luncheon in your honor. Most of you don't deliver that meal, drive that parishioner, sit at that hospital bedside, make those calls, to be able to say, "look what I did, I'm a good Deacon." Most of you don't put long hours into committee meetings, or oversee large church events like the Christmas Bazaar, to be able to say, "Aren't I great, I'm an important Ruling Elder." You serve here because you are a part of this community, you give of yourself each day as an offering to God. You are here right now because you want to worship and learn and receive the good news so that this next week you can strive to be more "Saintly". We are to do as Christ taught us, by living out a life of love, not just for one hour a week praising God, but with our whole lives. And that means being a disciple of Christ every day, and not being ashamed about it or embarrassed by it but proud of it, thankful for it.

Most people are familiar with Martin Luther King Jr.'s last speech "I have a Dream", but most aren't familiar with his very last sermon – "The Drum Major Instinct". He states, "we all have the drum major instinct. We all want to be important, to surpass others, to achieve distinction, to lead the parade. Alfred Adler, the great psychoanalyst, contends that this is the dominant impulse . . . this quest for recognition, this desire for attention, this desire for distinction is the basic impulse, the basic drive of human life, this drum major instinct.

But that isn't what Jesus did; he did something altogether different. He said in substance, "Oh, I see, you want to be first. You want to be great. You want to be important. You want to be significant. Well, you ought to be. If you're going to be my disciple, you must be." But he reordered priorities. And he said, "Yes, don't give up this instinct. It's a good instinct if you use it right. It's a good instinct if you don't distort it and pervert it. Don't give it up. Keep feeling the need for being important. Keep feeling the need for being first. But I want you to be first in love. I want you to be first in moral excellence. I want you to be first in generosity. That is what I want you to do."

And King goes on to say, "If any of you are around when I have to meet my day, I don't want a long funeral. And if you get somebody to deliver the eulogy, tell them not to talk too long. Tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize—that isn't important. Tell them not to mention that I have three or four hundred other awards—that's not important. Tell them not to

mention where I went to school. I'd like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to give his life serving others. Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that I was a drum major for peace. I was a drum major for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will not matter. I won't have any money to leave behind. I won't have the fine and luxurious things of life to leave behind. But I just want to leave a committed life behind."

We, like Martin Luther King, Jr. are all saints, and we need to live and teach as Jesus taught us. That no one is above anyone else, that God extends mercy and grace to everyone. And so what kind of student are you? What kind of teacher are you? I close by challenging you to write or call or meet with that favorite teacher and tell them why they are your favorite. I did. And chose to live as a student of God, eager to learn and open to new ways of learning. Choose to be a teacher of the ways of Jesus Christ, authentic, humble, loving, kind, and leave that kind of legacy, and don't be all mouth and no trousers. May it be so, Amen.