

Sermon for November 1, 2020

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

Sermon Texts: Revelation 7: 9-17 and Matthew 23: 1-12

Sermon Title: *“Jesus has had enough!”*

PRAYER OF INVOCATION: This is a prayer from Rabbi Harold Kushner called a Prayer for the World:

Let the rain come and wash away
the ancient grudges, the bitter hatreds
held and nurtured over generations.
Let the rain wash away the memory
of the hurt, the neglect.
Then let the sun come out and
fill the sky with rainbows.
Let the warmth of the sun heal us
wherever we are broken.
Let it burn away the fog so that
we can see each other clearly.
So that we can see beyond labels,
beyond accents, gender or skin color.
Let the warmth and brightness
of the sun melt our selfishness.
So that we can share the joys and
feel the sorrows of our neighbors.
And let the light of the sun
be so strong that we will see all
people as our neighbors.
Let the earth, nourished by rain,
bring forth flowers
to surround us with beauty.
And let the mountains teach our hearts
to reach upward to heaven.
Amen.

PRAYER OF ILLUMINATION: **Holy Spirit, you enlighten all with your truth. Plant your Word in our hearts as good seed, and allow it to grow into a rich harvest of justice, mercy, and love. Let it be the sharpened sword that separates truth from falsehood, as we seek to follow the One who was, and who is, and who is to come, your word of life, Jesus Christ. Amen.**

Halloween has always been one of my favorite holidays. When I was a child in Canada, it was often bitterly cold when Halloween came round, so you

wore your long johns under your costume, and you collected for UNICEF (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund). When I lived in Charlottesville, I had a border collie, Jack, who loved Halloween as much as I. He would get excited each time the doorbell rang and would greet each group of pirates, dragons, and ghosts with a vigorous wag of his tail. Now Dave and I live so far off the main road that we don't get any ghosts and goblins at all. So you must indulge me as I quote from an e-mail I received several years ago about pumpkins even though Halloween has passed.

The friend who sent me this email wrote that it had been passed on to her, and now I pass it on to you. The email was titled: *From one pumpkin to another. A woman was asked by a coworker, "What is it like to be a Christian? The coworker replied: "It is like being a pumpkin. God picks you from the patch, brings you in, and washes all the dirt off of you. Then he cuts off the top and scoops out all the yucky stuff. He removes the seeds of doubt, hate, and greed. Then he carves you a new smiling face and puts his light inside of you for all the world to see.*

Jesus has been trying very hard to carve the Pharisees and Sadducees into beautiful pumpkins with his arguments, parables, and questions. But by the time we get to today's lectionary text in Matthew's Gospel, it is clear that Jesus has had enough with them. Chapter 23 is an extended denunciation of their religious leadership and practices.

Here is a list of Jesus' criticisms about religious leadership in his day: They did not practice what they taught (hypocrisy). They put heavy burdens on others but not themselves (legalism).^[L]They sought and loved public recognition (pride).^[L]Status, respect and titles were important to them (arrogance).^[L]They locked people out of the kingdom (judgmental).^[L]They established laws to benefit themselves (greed).^[L]They neglected to emphasize justice and mercy (bias).^[L]They were accomplices to silencing the prophets (oppressive). I wonder if that is not the way that many people, especially young people, see the church today. Many people leave the church because they have been wounded by it. I know I did.

A pastor friend told the story of a young woman who was traveling in Europe; she had left the church many years before for all the reasons listed above, but one day, while sightseeing, she came upon an active church service. She met the minister at the door and told him all the issues she had

with the contemporary church. *“I guess you don’t want me to come in, do you?”* she concluded. The minister replied: *If you chose to come, you will not be turned away.* She went in. The healing had begun.

Most likely, Jesus has lost hope for the future of the Sadducees and the Pharisees. They are so tightly woven into the Roman power structure they are lost. Jesus is tough on the Pharisees, because they are still engaged with the questions. The Pharisees were an earnest lay movement, similar to ones we have seen in American politics, that sought to be reformers of Israel at a time of compromise and cynicism, especially on the part of the Sadducees, who controlled the high priesthood.

The Pharisees were people who cared deeply for the implications of the Law, but they wanted to keep the law as it was because they had fought so hard for those positions of power and influence. By clutching so tightly, however, they miss the point that Jesus is making.

Human nature, unlike that of the pumpkin, is riddled with vanity, hypocrisy, and arrogance. Jesus knows this. Jesus is talking about the true nature of discipleship, which may or may not have anything to do with the temple, or with the church, or with religious leaders.

According to Augustine, human sin is primarily a matter of pride. *Pride is a perverted imitation of God. For pride hates a fellowship of equality under God, and seeks to impose its own dominion on fellow men, in the place of God’s rule.* False hierarchies replace God’s rule, and we ignore what God tells us to do in order to protect our little fiefdoms.

All God’s children are equal before God, and all God’s children are students of the same teacher. This means that social and economic distinctions that might be functional to the operating of a society are not essential elements to it. The gifts of one group of people must be regarded as resources for the entire community rather than as individual accomplishments. *The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted,* Jesus reminds us.

Pride, and the sin resulting from it, come in different forms for different groups. It’s perhaps obvious that the proud should humble themselves, give away more of their resources to help their neighbors. What is not so obvious is how sin can manifest itself in the humble and the marginalized. For those who are poor and weak, sin might be isolating themselves and withdrawing

both from God and neighbor. They need to take their place among God's children. Perhaps we can help them do that by inviting them to worship.

For women, according to Anne E. Carr in her work *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women's Experience*, sin often takes the form of passive failure to develop a sense of self. Women who embrace what they believe to be their inferiority withdraw because they assume they have nothing to offer.

The true nature of discipleship and faithfulness is found not in the theologies one espouses or in the doctrines one accepts, but in the orientation of one's heart. As Augustine's words suggest, orienting one's whole self toward God entails a radical form of egalitarianism. People are unequal by many measures (some are better hockey players than others – Bobby Orr from Parry Sound, the best). Some have more musical ability or intelligence than most; others have more education or social standing). However, all are equal before God. In the words of H. Richard Niebuhr, from whom I adopted my benediction, God is the *common center to which all men are related; it is by reference to and in respect of their relation to that creative center that they are equal.*

Matthew's is a demanding gospel. A banqueter gets tossed into the outer darkness for showing up in the wrong clothes. There's no doubt for Matthew that acts have consequences, and there is no cheap grace. That being said, Matthew's Jesus forgives Peter's denial and the disciples' cowardice, and abides their post-resurrection doubt. It is to them and to us that Jesus entrusts his message to the world. We have been commissioned. Amen.