

Enough Already!

by Rev. Durrell Watkins, M.A., M.Div.
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Micah 3.5-12; Matthew 23.1-12

One day at a family reunion, my Great-Aunt Gladys was standing with her husband Arthur when her two brothers-in-law, whom she loathed, approached her. One brother-in-law said to her, "Well Gladys, I assume you're suing your hair-dresser for making you look like a walking rat's nest." Then and the other brother-in-law started laughing.

Aunt-Gladys instinctively started raising her hands to go for their throats, when Uncle Arthur stopped her and said, "Gladys. Think for a moment. What would Jesus do?" She paused, grabbed Uncle Arthur by the arm, and tossed him into the two brothers-in-law and they all three hit the ground with a thud.

Uncle Arthur said, "Gladys, why in the world did you do that?" She said, "I did what Jesus would do...I cast a demon into a herd of swine."

In this morning's readings, the prophet Micah addresses people in ministry who may not be in ministry for the noblest of reasons. Matthew offers us a similar message today's gospel lesson.

You'll remember there was an uprising against Rome from the years 66 to 70 AD. And at the end of that four year period, Rome crushed the rebellion very forcefully and actually destroyed the holy City of Jerusalem, and of course, its' Temple. At about that same time and I believe in response to those very events, Mark writes his gospel. About 15 years after that, around 85 AD, Matthew is writing his gospel.

In today's gospel reading, it could be that Matthew is responding to Mark, reading Mark's work from a decade and a half earlier, and adapting it for his community. The passage that may be inspiring Matthew's thinking is the 12th chapter of Mark's gospel.

Mark tells us that "Jesus said, 'Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted in the marketplaces, and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such people [are utterly loathsome].'"

And that flows right into the story of the widow's mite. The people who use religion for their own status make a big deal about everything so that they can get credit, praise, acknowledgment...they are trying to turn being a priest or a teacher into being some kind of aristocracy. They like the trappings, the costumes, the titles, the privilege. Meanwhile, there is a poor woman of very meager resources who quietly, humbly, but generously gives the largest gift she can. It's only a couple of coins, but she could hoard those coins and hope to save up enough for some luxury. But she believes in giving, and without needing to be noticed or even thanked, she gives all that she can as an act of worship. She gives for the joy of giving, and expects nothing really in return. But she does get something; she get's Jesus' affirmation. Her faithfulness mattered after all.

Matthew takes the first part of that story, the part that criticizes the people who are in religious leadership for their own sense of fulfillment, and he leaves out the opposite example of the poor widow, who gives out of joy rather than out of a desire to be rewarded. Matthew just wants to focus on the leaders who exploit the poor for their own advantage, and so he adapts Mark's story, leaving out the faithful widow whom Mark included.

In any case, Matthew agrees with Mark that 1. Religion is important, and 2. Some people use it improperly to make themselves feel better at the expense of others.

Isn't that what is happening when we use religion to say, "WE are saved, and THEY are not"? Isn't that what is happening when we use religion to say, "WE can marry, and THEY cannot"? Isn't that what is happening when we use religion to say, "Support those who will protect our power and privilege instead of doing what we can to help all people achieve the dream of equality and justice"? Religion is important, but when misused, it can do great harm.

So, Matthew is trying to redeem religion...trying to confront its abuses, just like Mark and Micah did, so that it can be the healing balm it is meant to be.

Matthew has made it clear in the chapters leading up to this one that his approach to scripture is to interpret it on the basis of the love commands. Love God, love neighbor, love yourself and extend that love to neighbors, love the Canaanite mother, love the Roman centurion and his "servant," show love by doing unto others as you would have others do unto you. Matthew values his tradition, and he values his sacred texts, but he challenges those who use the tradition or the scriptures to exclude others or to promote themselves above others.

Love and compassion are the interpretive tools that Matthew advocates, and he is staying true to that message today. He is telling us that it is never pretty to confuse our ego with God.

A legalistic bureaucracy where God is a control-freak and where God interestingly enough needs the people in power to exercise control on God's behalf...well, it's good work if you can get it, but Matthew believes God must be more than that.

Scriptures are to be used to heal, empower, and uplift others, not to put others down so that we can ignore our own sense of not-enough-ness. Religion isn't meant to make us feel better than them; it is meant to make all of us feel good enough so that we don't need to demonize "them."

If we love ourselves, and then love others as we love ourselves, then we don't need the trappings to make us feel important...we'll know our value; we'll know that all people are children of God. And then we will give from our abundance of goodwill for the joy of sharing, and not to get something back which we feel we are lacking.

Do you know why I give such brief blessings at communion? When I serve communion, I don't pray long...I say 20 words...takes about 5 seconds...why? Because it's not about me. That bread and that cup are symbols of God's all-inclusive and unconditional love...what could I possibly say that would improve on that message? I give the elements and a five second blessing and then I get out of the way so that you can have your experience with the god of your understanding. Ministry is about giving and getting out of the way.

If you join the church, or a ministry team, or the choir...if you give a gift...if you go to seminary, or want to become a deacon, or if you are wondering if you should pursue ordination...Matthew offers some great advice. Matthew is telling us that if we want those things to make us feel better about ourselves, we are doing it for the wrong reasons and it won't work.

We are called to ministry to be servants, not celebrities. We give our time, our money, our talents, our ideas, our selves...because we have those gifts to give and because we want to be a blessing to others. And when we share our gifts for the right reasons, we'll get what we need.

When we give to give, we get what we need. When we give to get, we never seem to get enough. Every thank you, every word of praise, every compliment is too little, too late. We'll always want more and no amount will suffice.

When we make it about us, it's never enough for us. When we make it about giving, sharing, loving...then we get more than we ever dreamed possible. When we know that we are one with the other, then when we help the other, we are blessed. It seems a paradox that we almost have

to stop wanting in order to stop being in want. But that's what *A Course in Miracles* means when it says, "Giving and receiving are one in truth."

That's what is meant by that proverb attributed to Winston Churchill: "We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give."

That's what Luke was teaching us when he put these words in Jesus' mouth, "Give and it shall be given unto you – good measure, pressed down, shaken together and overflowing!"

It's what Jesus is getting at when he says, "Seek first the divine Realm, the experience of divine Love, and then all these other things will be given to you."

It's what people in my neck of the woods meant when they would say, "You can't out-give God."

When we give praise, offerings, ministry, assistance...when we give to get something back...honor, titles, prestige...we never get enough. But when we give for the joy of giving, we experience that joy in abundance and get so many other blessings, too. We find that we get enough, because we are enough, and it's out of that enough-ness that we were sharing anyway.

Matthew says, Don't be like the teachers of the law...the legalists...the people using religion to get something for themselves. Follow Jesus' example instead, give for the joy of giving, and your gifts will then work miracles and you'll find that you will get more from your own giving than anyone else could ever give you. The simple message is, in reality, you are already good enough. You can believe it, and you can share from your sacred enough-ness.

This is the good news. Amen.

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