

## *The Servant Life*

Ezekiel 34: 1-6, 15-22      Matthew 23: 1-12

Mother Theresa never sought worldwide acclaim for her amazing work in the slums of Calcutta, but she got it. Despite this outpouring of admiration and reverence for her ministry, she didn't seem to be changed in her character or demeanor. She was a servant of the Lord through and through.

Emeritus Pope Benedict used the papacy for an agenda that sought to return the Catholic Church to more traditional practices. In his first address to the crowds, he proclaimed himself "a simple, humble laborer in the vineyard of the Lord." But he was known for snappy red shoes which Pope John Paul has discontinued wearing, and also could be seen in a bright red hat at times. He seemed quite taken with the trappings of the office.

Pope Francis has been a different Pope, seeking to embrace humility and eschewing the trappings of office, not unlike his papal namesake St. Francis of Assisi. He opted to live in a guest house rather than the Apostolic Palace, chose simpler vestments, a silver ring instead of a gold one, takes public transit, cooks his own meals, and doesn't seem interested in staying in Rome for long. Yes, the red shoes went to the back of the closet once again.

Neither Pope had a choice about their notoriety, but both sought to use their office to advance a particular view of the church and its worldwide mission. One chose more of the trappings, the other chose less, but both were captured by the power of the office and its importance in advancing a particular view of the church and its relationship to power, wealth, and prestige.

(By the way, this isn't "Pick on the Catholic Church Sunday." The Roman Catholic Church simply provides more interesting contrasts than boring Presbyterians and Methodists, for example.)

In Protestant circles, there are plenty of celebrity pastors who are on TV, lead a mega-church, write books, and do really, really well for themselves. The problem that I have (maybe you, too) is that the servant life doesn't necessarily come to mind when you think of them. They may be wonderful servants, and I'm sure most are, but the celebrity status seems to get in the way.

The reason we may feel uncomfortable about these folks, and likely never felt so uncomfortable about Mother Theresa, is that we wonder how connected they are to the everyday lives of people, the way Jesus was, for instance. His ministry did not involve writing books, or being broadcast to millions of viewers, or getting chauffeur-driven (not counting that ride on the donkey into Jerusalem). His ministry was meeting and getting met by people in need, and showing them the way of faith, love, grace, and new life. His ministry was also controversial, confronting the authorities – the powerful ruling elites

of religion, society, and politics – and bringing a message that would make him a target. That’s a dangerous kind of notoriety, indeed fatal.

Celebrity types in our world today can be remarkably insulated, enrapt by their own hype, and lose their focus on the good news of Jesus and tilt unmistakably to a good news of their own taste and flavor, one that brings success, fame, and fortune. The only time they’re typically surrounded by controversy is when there is a salacious scandal or when they say something incredibly stupid. Rarely is there controversy for their stance on something that was at the *center* of Jesus’ teachings.

Today’s scriptures both deal with those who were supposed to be servants, but who get called out for being self-serving instead.

Starting with the passage from Ezekiel, we hear the prophet being instructed by God to prophesy, to utter a new reality that God the Creator is authoring. On the timeline, Ezekiel is somewhat contemporary with Jeremiah, prophesying after the Babylonians have sacked and destroyed Jerusalem, the nation of Judah has fallen, and many of the people sent into slavery in Babylon.

Ezekiel is told by God to prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Of course, the use of “shepherds” here expresses the familiar metaphor for a king or ruler. Bad and evil rulers from the time of the Old Babylonian Dynasty brought about the common expression, “a people without a king are like sheep without a shepherd.”

These shepherds are accused of taking care of themselves rather than their flock. They help themselves to what the flock provides – “eat the curds, clothe with their wool, and slaughter the choice animals.” But the shepherds have shown no interest in caring for the flock’s well-being. The weak are not strengthened, the sick are not healed, and the lost are forgotten. The flock has been scattered and attacked, having fallen prey to predators.

Indeed, the description of the brutal exploitation and blind indifference by the rulers – the shepherds – is more reminiscent of what would occur under a conquering despot rather than a worthy ruler or shepherd to the people. Indeed, in scattering, the people were protecting themselves from the harsh conditions imposed by the native rulers *in their homeland*.

God will now assert his authority, proclaiming that God will become shepherd to his people, providing direct leadership as in ages past. God is also set against the unworthy shepherds, promising accountability for their injustice and pledging to remove God’s people as a source for the shepherds’ self-indulgence. *I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.* God promises justice; look out!

But God isn’t through yet. There are problems beyond the shepherds, indeed ***within*** the flock. The parameters are similar as it seems God will be judging between

the fat sheep and the lean sheep. There is no need for the harsh and exploitive practices of the “fat sheep” against the “lean sheep.” The “fat sheep” allow violence, injustice, oppression, and exploitation of their lessers in the flock. God the Creator provided for the well-being of all, but the “fat sheep” seem to feel entitled to take and use whatever they want, even if the results deprive others – the “lean sheep” – of well-being of their own. God created and intended well-being for all; there is plenty that has been provided in abundance to satisfy them all. But God finds, *Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture? When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet? And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have fouled with your feet?*

As the shepherds have failed to serve their flock, and the fat and happy within the flock have served only themselves, we can find broad application today, even though the spheres of religion and politics are more separated today as opposed to their convergence and inseparability in ancient society. Many Christians are remarkably content with denouncing help for the sick, the weak, the poor, and the vulnerable, unless it’s charity – then it may be okay to help **those** people, and if they’ve accepted Jesus as Lord, and if ... and if. The message is transparent. Scorned, judged, and condemned, the “lean sheep” remain fodder for the “fat sheep.

In Matthew, Jesus is teaching before an audience that includes not only his disciples and any bystanders in the Temple, but leading Sadducees and Pharisees. Jesus has already addressed their pointed questions and frustrated their attempts to get him to say something incriminating that would be a plausible excuse for his arrest. He hasn’t said the magic words yet.

Now Jesus turns to the crowds and shares another message. Wisely, Jesus prefaces his remarks by making sure that he affirms the teaching authority of the elites who have to come to hear him. But he only affirms their **teaching authority**, pulling out a sharp barb, *do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach.*

Jesus goes on to describe the indifference of the elites to the hardships their legal interpretations can have on God’s people. Far from serving God’s people in a servant style, they burden God’s people and would falsely declare that God requires this.

Taking the criticism further, Jesus begins highlighting the trappings of their office. He points out that they’re not motivated by what God requires, but by the favor of their peers. They call attention to themselves with their dress and appearance, gain prestigious places in the pecking order at social events, and covet the fawning of others who grant them respect and privilege.

This is not what should happen among those faithful to God, and in Matthew’s time several generations later, it should not happen among those who follow Jesus in the communities of the Way, in the church. Titles, for instance, were typically used as devices to separate people from each other whereas Jesus was all about seeing each

other as sisters and brothers in the family of God who are motivated by the justice and righteousness of Jesus who is to be their model and their guide.

This piece of Jesus' discussion concludes: *The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts themselves will be humbled, and whoever humbles themselves will be exalted.*

Jesus will continue an extensive diatribe for the rest of the chapter, adding layers of "woes" in charges against the rulers and religious elites. He builds on that focus of humility in service as compared to the corrupt and self-serving practices of teachers of the Law and Pharisees.

I think we understand the nature of the servant life, one that is humbly adopted and sustained, given in service to others, and focused on sacred ministry that embraces the Kingdom values of love and justice, righteousness and peace, healing and new life.

We have every reason to be suspicious of those who've gained celebrity status, who make claims in their ministry on others, who may easily have lost their way amid the trappings of notoriety and wealth and have found themselves willing to bend the Word to bless themselves rather than the people of God.

Further, it is too easy in our comfort and defined social circles to become insulated from the needs of people who are unlike ourselves in their way of life. Where we may rarely struggle and may not have done so in many years, if ever, others struggle with the basics of getting by, and are regarded suspiciously in their need, as if they might be trying to exploit our good-heartedness.

In that insulated world, we could become no different from ruling elites and privileged folks of Jesus' time. Indeed, "woe unto" us if we cannot see the need of a sister or brother, but instead revile them for not doing what we would do, condemn them for not acting like we had acted, and judge them for not meeting the standard that we had established to be true and worthy. In our superiority and self-absorbed righteousness, we could easily make ourselves into lords and royals who set onerous and unnecessary conditions on others, but rarely apply those same values and standards on peers or family.

Insulated from that other world, that world of another, we might have become disconnected, indifferent, and insensitive. We would have lost the connection that Jesus wanted us to have, with him as our brother, and the rest of the family of God as sisters and brothers together, not alienated and separated into clans, cliques, and clubs.

May we be watchful and wise concerning those to whom we grant authority and attention, expecting a servant life that reveres humility and is focused on service. And may we also be mindful of ourselves, that we not act as the "fat sheep" but rather recognize our calling to serve together with sisters and brothers in a spirit of love, grace, and compassion, sharing the new way and empowering blessing of new life in Jesus, Savior of us all.