

Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost – Christina Smerick

Joshua 3:7-17; Psalm 107:1-7, 33-37; 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13; Matthew 23:1-12

I am Dr. Christina Smerick, Associate Professor of Philosophy and the Shapiro Chair of Jewish-Christian Studies at Greenville College. Joining me on the dais this morning is Dr. Walter Fenton, Vice President of Advancement. Here in the congregation we have Dr. Brad Shaw, Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences; Dr. Randy Bergen, Provost of our college.

Perhaps our forefathers in the field of Christian Higher Education didn't read Matthew 23.

In particular, I am feeling the fringes of my shawl to be embarrassingly long this morning.

I've been thinking a lot about leadership lately, mostly because I don't want to be a leader. It's so very hard. Leaders can start off with the best of intentions, only to find themselves autocratically expecting others to carry burdens we seek to avoid ourselves; they can start off aiming for humility but quickly become insulted if someone doesn't acknowledge their rank, accomplishments, their exalted position. We all know that we're called to submit, to be servant-leaders, but the best seat in the house really is the best seat and it is hard to refuse it. We place much emphasis on looking the part—wearing that tie, having that responsible haircut (oops).

This doesn't just apply to those of us who are recognized as leaders, but to all of us. We all participate in the culture of glorification and obsequiousness. We like rankings. But if we look at 1 Thessalonians and the Gospel passage side by side, we can form a guide to both leadership and to ecclesiology. When we contrast Paul's description of the leaders and bringers of the Gospel with Jesus' critique of, at first glance, the Pharisees (but note who he is addressing—the crowd and disciples), we find a dichotomy: on one side, we have how not to behave, and on the other, we have what servant leadership is supposed to look like. Paul states that rather than burdening his fellow Christians, he has 'worked day and night' not to be financially dependent upon them. Contrast this to the "others" (we'll just call them that—to call them Pharisees lets us off the hook), who place burdens and requirements upon their followers that break them. I'd like to pause here to read you a poem written by one of our alums:

Evangelicalism

Their warding curses

write in gold and black.

The first, enforcing rarity.

Second, making sure we don't
forget our getting off the track;
conjuring one unseen eternity
in front and leaving yet
another night and chasing
at the back.

Ouch. But really good. A good description of what the Pharisees were doing; and what Jesus exhorts us not to do.

Paul, on the other hand, the first evangelist, works to 'encourage, comfort and 'charge' (exhort, urge, correct). Whereas the others seem obsessed with titles and power and prestige and honor, Paul praises the Thessalonians for not confusing the messenger with the message: recognizing that, while Paul is indeed a wonderful word-bringer, the word he speaks is not his own, but God's. The Thessalonians are to be praised not for their fringes and power grabs, but for having suffered—for having been persecuted by their own people, just as the church in Jerusalem was persecuted by their fellow Jews. (this is excluded from our reading because Paul is being mean to the Jews...I think).

Likewise, Jesus corrects our tendency to seek glory or rank: "You have one teacher, and you are all students." None of us can claim truly to be teachers (I'm hoping this doesn't cause open rebellion), for we have one teacher. As students, while we may jostle for position some and compare GPAs, we are ultimately (ideally) ready to learn, open to new ideas, and humble about what we think we know. We are in the process of learning, not its end. We are on the journey—to claim we have reached the destination is to be prideful beyond all measure. In good Socratic form, we know we know nothing—and we're all in it together. Paul acknowledges this in his own leadership: while claiming his role as leader is to be a 'father' (but the good kind: an encouraging, comforting dad, one who reprimands only for the other's benefit), he also claims to be 'orphaned' without his people, lost and bereft (this in a passage excluded from our lectionary):

*As for us, brothers and sisters, when, for a short time, we were made orphans by being separated from you—in person, not in heart—we longed with great eagerness to see you face to face. For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, wanted to again and again—but Satan blocked our way. For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? **Is it not you?** Yes, **you** are our glory and joy!*

What a beautiful passage. Paul is nothing—his community is everything. His hope and joy and glory are not found in himself, but in his people.

We are all servants; none of us can claim to be the one true leader, for we have one leader already. If there's a banquet, none of us are called to the front table, for all of us are 'brothers and sisters'. We shouldn't seek to be feted, honored, and fed well—rather than being a burden upon others, or placing expectations upon them that are too hard to bear, we are to work to serve others, and expect nothing from them that we don't expect from ourselves. We should seek to be 'holy, righteous and blameless', rather than expecting others to be so. And indeed, it is "the word of God at work in you who believe," not our own work.

Robert Hamerton-Kelly writes, "There are two things that destroy the possibility of leadership, hypocrisy and arrogance, and so two things that make it possible, honesty and humility. Humility is not self-denigration and self-abuse, but rather self-knowledge of my total need of and dependence on Jesus Christ. It's not my faith in God that counts, but God's faith in me, not my hold on God but God's hold on me, not my love for God but God's love for me."

At times, as leaders and as brothers and sisters, we find ourselves in, as Brian likes to say, a 'liminal' place. Perhaps in the midst of crossing from one place to the other; on our way but not yet arrived. Existentially, we are always in that place; but sometimes we feel it more than others. And when we're crossing that river, we look to leaders to guide our steps—it's only natural, human, that we should do so. Yet what must always be remembered in those extra-liminal places is that even our leaders are led—it is God who leads, God who holds back the waters, God who directs the path, God who blesses and anoints, God who instructs and guides, God who, when we are most humble, speaks through us. When we struggle to lead or to follow, when our culture presses in, when we get caught up in comparing tassels and fringes, or get caught up in thinking that it is all up to us to fix, to find, to know, to lead—it is so very helpful and comforting to remember our (to quote Diane Leclerc) desperate dependence upon God. Getting caught up in our own power or powerlessness is a brittle place; we become rigid and fearful, defensive, and that is when we become Pharisees. Maybe I'm using too much 'we' here; as always, I find myself preaching the sermon I, most of all, need to hear. When I get caught up in my own sense of 'fixing' and 'doing' and 'leading', I get brittle, defensive, fearful, judgmental. I become strident, and expect from others what I would never want for myself. How wide and deep is the grace of God, such that it can gently take me down, off my feet, off my high horse, and remind me that all, every last bit of this life and world, is cradled in the hands of God. We don't have to be obsessed with being in charge—because it is not our own word, but God's word in us, that is truly the way, the truth and the life. Thanks be to God.