



breadfortheworld
HAVE FAITH. END HUNGER.

October 30, 2011: Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time ***Walter Wink***

RCL: Joshua 3:7-17; Psalm 107:1-7, 33-37; 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13; Matthew 23:1-12
LM: Malachi 1:14b-2:2b, 8-10; Psalm 131:1,2, 3; 1 Thessalonians 2:7b-9, 13;
Matthew 23:1-12

[Note: Walter Wink's reflection for this week focuses exclusively on the Gospel passage]

Much of the intolerance and hatred directed toward persons of other religions arises from the failure to recognize religion's inescapable *ambivalence*. Religion is the source of our highest values, role models, love of creation, self-sacrifice, consolation, outrage against injustice, and much more. But religion also generates prejudice, exclusion, witch hunts, crusades, inquisitions, patriarchal dominance, the abuse of children, fanaticism, holy wars, and the murderous conviction that we alone are right. All religions are guilty of these aberrations, without exception.

To be sure, the great religions are paths to the divine. They have produced saints, mystics, wise women and men, great teachers of the religious path. But typically only one side of the ambivalence is acknowledged. Adherents of religion A condemn religion B for not living up to the highest values of religion A; meanwhile, adherents of religion B condemn religion A for the same. And the criticisms of both may hold sonic truth.

This is the necessary background for reading Matthew 23. Most members of the early churches were Jews, and so their controversy with other Jews was an in-house dispute between coreligionists. The scathing attack on the scribes and Pharisees here has not yet completely degenerated to name-calling and rejection. For Matthew makes it clear that the disciples of Jesus are to obey the Jewish religious authorities. Considering later hatred between Christians and Jews, this willingness to stand under their opponent's authority is amazing.

Both parties make serious charges, worded with biting force. But the author of Matthew's Gospel makes this qualification: Do what they say, but not what they do. At this point the disputants still honor the ambivalence of the religion over which they quarrel. Would that later Christians had maintained the distinction! For this holds as a critique of all religions: Do as they say, but not as they do.

And what are the charges Matthew's synagogue brings against its rivals, ostensibly in other synagogues? First, that they burden people with laws and customs that take all the joy out of religion, smear them with guilt, and bring them under the authority of people for whom they have no respect and who only say but don't do. Pause there. Do we for one moment think that Matthew's community was not guilty of the same behavior? "They do all their deeds to be seen by others" (v. 5). Do Christians not do the same? Of course they



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try not to do so, but they lapse. Egos get in the way. People want to be well thought of, so they fall into the very trap their opponents have. Both sides claim the other says but doesn't do.

The same goes for Matthew's other charges. The scribes and Pharisees dress with religious ostentation. They jostle to get the most prestigious seats in the synagogues and love to be loudly acclaimed as religious leaders in public places. Do we think that Christians do not do the same? How else do we explain the regression in the early Church to patriarchal power arrangements that excluded women from power and office and created new offices far more dictatorial than anything in the synagogues (which were much more democratic) and liturgical garb far more ostentatious than their Jewish neighbors?

Jesus tried to head this off. He forbade titles like rabbi, teacher or master, claiming all such honors for God, who alone is our Rabbi, Teacher, and Father. No titles, no Ph.D., D.Min., no M.D., no M.S.W. – none of that trash, because Jesus demands equality, and titles create hierarchies that inevitably exclude, shame, and treat others as inferiors. Instead, he provides a standard of behavior in which the powerful renounce prestige. The greatest is a servant. The world had never seen such an inversion of power-and in most churches, it still hasn't.

Children's Time

Written by Larry Hollar

Today's lessons offer at least two good opportunities. One is to underscore the difference between saying and doing arising in the Gospel story. Some examples of "saying" that children understand are when they say they'll keep their room clean, or remember to put their bike away, or come inside from playing at a certain time, or be nice to a friend or neighbor. Adults have their own things like that-mention a few of your own, including some serious ones like praying. Sometimes we really mean to do those things, but we don't actually do them, or we do them only part way and expect to get all the credit. Because we love God and God loves us, we make promises to God, such as loving each other and helping those who are in need. God wants us not just to say those things but to do them with a glad heart.

A different possibility for children's time arises from Psalm 107:35-37. Bring in a large bowl or box filled with sand and have children run their hands through it. Read the psalm text from a popular translation, as it speaks of God making things grow in the desert. We think of sand when we think of the beach or a sandbox to play in, but a sandy desert is not a place we think of for growing things, where people can live and eat enough. But God can do many things, bringing life to places where there isn't any, giving us hope when we're sad, offering food to everyone who is hungry. God can do amazing things, and we can help do God's work.



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Musical Suggestions
Prepared by Larry Hollar

Jesu, Jesu-UMH 432
Together We Serve-FWS 2175
Won't You Let Me Be Your Servant?-NCH 539
O Praise the Gracious Power-PH 471

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