

Joshua 3:7-17

Psalms 107:1-7, 33-37 I

1 Thessalonians 2:9-13

Matthew 23:1-12

The Equalizer

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, 2“‘The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; 3therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. 4They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. 5They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. 6They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, 7and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. 8But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. 9And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father – the one in heaven. 10Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. 11The greatest among you will be your servant. 12All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

Recently, yet another dictator was found in a hole and died a violent death rather than graciously give up power. Steven noticed this the other day, men who chose death rather than continue living stripped of power. Let’s see, there was the French King Louis XVI, Hitler, Mussolini, Ceau- ses-cu, Saddam Hussein, Muammar Gaddafi . . . and I’m sure there are more that we haven’t thought about. It is that obsession with self - over other people and God’s will - that brings about a sort of craziness. And it is all the more frightening when these crazy people have power. And still – you don’t have to be a dictator or a King to suffer from a misuse of authority. According to Tim Beach-Verhey, “the vanity, hypocrisy, and arrogance that trouble Jesus are a universal human characteristic . . . {he goes on to explain that} human sin, which provokes alienation from God and one another is primarily a matter of pride, according to Augustine: ‘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.’ It is so easy to confuse our interests with God’s purposes, our power with God’s sovereignty, our standing with God’s glory.”

A bit of irony here is that Jesus was in reality hierarchically above all humanity, including those spiritual leaders to whom so many people looked for guidance and insight. And yet, he continually lead by example and that example was as one who served others without regard to the social ranking. There were wealthy and educated followers of Jesus as well as poor and uneducated. Jesus inspired people of all socio-economic realms. The only people he had difficulty with were those who had a disconnect between themselves and other people – those who lacked a sense of striving for integrity, and that covers all of humanity.

According to H. Richard Niebuhr, 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.” Rev. Beach-Verhey continues on with this train of thought by saying, “All social distinctions and special offices, therefore, must be understood as functional rather than essential. The gifts and abilities of particular people must be seen as resources for the sake of the entire community rather than as individual endowments that distinguish people from another.”

In other words, those called to inspire the people are there because of the gifts they have to contribute the community and they are resources for others. They are not there for glorification or special status. They are not there to be made distinctive and granted with more power than others – but they are there to serve. They, too, would be recipients of the contributions from others at an equal ratio of value.

That is why Jesus says “9And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father – the one in heaven” - because everyone belonging to the same Father is a great equalizer, challenging the proud to be humble and the humbled to rise and take their place.

In a similar fashion, those who are weak and oppressed are challenged to seek strength and reconciliation in order to offer their hidden talents to the community. To some theologians those who have withdrawn from life assuming they have nothing to offer are just as equally sinning as those who abuse the authority given to them. But what balances it all out is the abundance of Grace that is offered. “Sinning” in this sense is a process of realization of the need for and accepting the grace, so that we can continue to serve God and each other and not be overcome with shame.

It can be quite a challenge to do what Paul was referring to in his first letter to the Thessalonians, which was our Epistle reading for today; when he implored them, to “lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.” Focusing on God is a challenge to even the most pious of us all. Our desires, fears and anxieties sometimes dominate so much of our mind and energies that we can’t see our own actions clearly let alone discern God’s desires for us and for others.

Our Old Testament reading was about the transition of authority from Moses to Joshua; “The Lord said to Joshua, ‘This day I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, so that they may know that I will be with you as I was with Moses.’” It wasn’t one of Moses’ sons who inherited the position, as Moses thought – but a fellow Israelite who had a reputation for serving God, he was a minor figure in the Torah, being one of the spies for Israel, not from a position of leadership. Once again, God looks upon the heart and is the great Equalizer.

“11The greatest among you will be your servant. 12All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Oddly enough, the foundation of the sinners – those who abuse their authority and those who deny their responsibilities – is often from the same cause – that of insecurity.

If one is confident in themselves there would be no need to strive for attention. Pride is often a disguise for the soul to cover up weaknesses. And lack of accomplishment is often a deep seated sense of worthlessness. And the reality is – all human beings have weaknesses and sins and pride and hypocrisy - that is why we must cling to our God – because our Father in heaven loves us and wants only our happiness. A happiness that comes from giving for others, forgiving ourselves, loving to learn about life, compassion, and most of all – trusting God. For God is a power that can bind us one to the other not in hypocrisy and self-aggrandizement, nor in mutual misery, but in the journey to the promised land of community, security and joy.

And may the peace of God which surpasses all understand guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, amen.