

Servants as Leaders

The Rev. Renée Marie Rico

Faith Presbyterian Church, Sierra Vista, AZ

Sunday, November 1, 2020

On Earth as in Heaven: God's Call for Justice 4/All Saints Day

Micah 3:5-12, Matthew 23:1-12

Yet another contest

In this passage, Jesus finds yet another way to call out the Pharisees as hypocrites – this time by noting that they have good teaching, but they do not follow it themselves. It might be perplexing, but what apparently happened was that in order to maintain their status in public, the Pharisees would exaggerate their holiness by what they wore, and would insist on taking precedence at mealtimes and prayer, and added extra practices of holiness beyond what the scriptures required in order to show how holy they were – or thought they were.

Jesus is having nothing of this. The best thing he can say is that they teach the scriptures correctly, but that's about it.

It makes clear Jesus' priorities, which are not that far from the ones of the prophet Micah, are with those who need to be protected from those who lead the people astray.

The Essentials

One of the things that I mention to those joining the Presbyterian Church is that we have low standards, but in a good way. In order to be a member of the church of Jesus Christ, really there is only one requirement – to declare Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and to trust in him. That's what we ask of those who choose to join the church, and then we invite them on a journey of faith, which is always centered in love.

Last week, we reviewed the two great commandments of Jesus, to love God with our our strength, soul and might, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. That is plenty for us to live into during our lives as we looked those commandments last week, and carries us into the best ways of sharing God's love with the world.

Servant as leader

As in other passages in the gospel, Jesus invites his followers to a distinguishing way of living from those who want to bring him down. His way is to form leaders as servants, another way of interpreting the two commandments.

I've had a lot of jobs where serving was the primary role – the first was working as a server for the catering company that my Mom also worked for. I was just a teenager at the time, while most everyone else was grown-up, and the events I worked at were usually the 200+ up dinners of civic clubs like the Kiwanis and Lions Clubs. They were BIG events, and usually in a large church hall rented for the occasion.

Many of those we served were lovely people, but in such large groups, there were inevitably a few who were grouchy. Initially I was pretty surprised at this, and was ready to be grouchy back, but as I watched the women who did this all the time (they were almost always women), I learned that you can lead someone to better behavior by how you serve them. If they are grouchy, offer attention and a smile and a small joke. Keep up a running dialogue as you walk by them so you can build a relationship just for that evening. By the end of the evening, the grouchy folks were helping us as we were clearing the tables, and even saying thank you!

Since that first job as a server, I've served in many other jobs in high school and college, and frankly I think everyone should have to do some kind of job like this in their life. It makes you see the world in a different way, and forces you to make small decisions on how to treat people on a daily basis. You learn to serve your neighbors.

Church is like that. Pastors wear these stoles as a sign of their servant status, and when our officers of the church get commissioned, we answer to this question: *Will you serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination and love?* When we do that, we are the best of the church.

It's that kind of servant leadership that can create a church. Those who founded this church back in the 1980s did just that – it took imagination for those few people who went to the Presbytery to say that they wanted to start a Presbyterian Church in Sierra Vista. It took lots of energy to do all the initial tasks to organize a church, to search for an organizing pastor, to find land, purchase it, arrange for a mortgage and build its membership. It took intelligence to navigate growing the church, and building a children and youth building, and then again to build a formal sanctuary and office building. It took love to form a caring community for those in the church family, and now to reach out to hurting folks, whether near or far.

That's the kind of servant leadership that Jesus was teaching, and lives at Faith today. This statement of MLK still rings true.

“Everybody can be great, because everybody can serve. You don’t have to have a college degree to serve. You don’t have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love.”

Servants as Saints

As we gather on this All Saints Day in 2020, we are remembering the saints in a new way via our online service. In a typical year, Faith members would write names of those we want to remember on ribbons that we would place on the cross. After the service, some would walk over to the columbarium where we would remember loved ones whose ashes are kept safely there.

This year that practice is interrupted, but the remembering is not. We can, from wherever we are, still say their names, we can still remember and honor those loved ones, they are still a great cloud of witnesses across the miles and time as we worship.

In a moment we will remember the final group of members and pastors of this church who have passed on. But I know that among us there are other names to remember this year – family members and friends. Our country is still coping with the pandemic and many names said this year across our country in churches will be those who died of the coronavirus.

I invite you, in this moment, to say these additional names, aloud or silently.

(a time of silence)

Amen.