

# PREACHING

## WORD AND WITNESS

---

PENTECOST 23:

October 31, 1999, Vol 99:6 (Year A)

**COMMENTARY**—*Joshua 3:7-17; Psalm 107:1-7; 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13; Matthew 23:1-12*

All of today's lectionary texts, excluding Psalm 107, have something to say about the authority of the leaders of the faithful community, a knotty issue for most North Americans who have become too accustomed to having their leaders, religious and otherwise, exposed as frauds, hypocrites, or moral failures. However, because our texts also betray an awareness of this difficulty, perhaps this is not quite as modern a problem as we might think.

In Matthew 23:1-12 Jesus challenges the Pharisees' views on the matter. Before this point in the gospel several groups of Jewish leaders have been dogging and baiting Jesus, chipping away at his authority, trying to trap him into making at least one embarrassing mistake. The last group to try, the Pharisees, have just given up on this project after Jesus confounded them with an insoluble riddle (Mt. 22:46). So in the introduction to our text, Mt. 23:1-2, Jesus turns his attention away from his opponents and toward the crowds and disciples who have been following him. But the conversation still concerns the Pharisees and the scribes.

Right away we are put on notice that Jesus has no dispute with the foundation of their authority; he himself acknowledges that they "sit on Moses' seat" (Mt. 23:2). This of course is no surprise to Matthew's readers since we have been repeatedly told or led to infer that Jesus has no argument with the Jewish law itself (cf. 3:17-20;

7:12; 22:34-40). His quarrel is with the way in which the Pharisees exercise the leadership they have been given.

In the first major section of this text, vss. 3-7, Jesus levels a series of indictments against the misuse of their authority. As Daniel Patte says, "their deeds and attitudes show that they have a false view of authority; they believe that authority is something that belongs to them and that they must strive to preserve by making sure other people acknowledge it" (Daniel Patte, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 322).

As Jesus warms up to his topic, he says that the Pharisees "tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others" (Mt. 23:4). Matthew's readers may well remember that Jesus had earlier said that those who carried burdens too heavy for them would find rest and a much lighter burden in him (Mt. 11:28-30). Surely the contrast is intentional. Jesus' authority does not require his followers to do more than he himself would do nor does it press them beyond endurance.

In the second major section, Mt. 23:8-12, Jesus gives direct commands in response to the hypocritical behavior of the Pharisees. The crucial connecting word is "rabbi" in vs. 7. The Pharisees may well love to be addressed by titles, but Jesus firmly draws the line against such things. He expressly prohibits his followers from using the term for one another. He also forbids the practice of calling another person "father" and "instructor" or "teacher." In fact, he seems to be abolishing the use of all honorifics, a stern reminder that any authority his followers might possess is rooted solely in their relationship to God and God's Messiah. This fact in turn affects their relationships with one another. No follower is

above another; all are equally students, all are equally brothers and sisters.

The last two verses contain the punch line of the entire pericope: “The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted” (Mt. 23:11-12). Authority does not depend upon the exaltation of oneself; indeed, it has nothing at all to do with human aggrandizement. Rather, the proper attitude is humility, which, according to Frederick Buechner, “doesn’t consist of thinking ill of yourself but of not thinking of yourself much differently from the way you’d be apt to think of anybody else” (Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, 40).

Perhaps Paul might have benefited from a reading of these words from the First Gospel, although it had not appeared in its final form when this former Pharisee was writing to the Thessalonians. At first glance he seems to be on the same track of self-exaltation as the Jewish companions of his youth are accused of. In 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13, Paul seems quite happy to recount for his readers his own accomplishments and successfully surmounted difficulties. He enlists these fellow believers as witnesses, in much the same way as the Pharisees of Matthew’s gospel tried to enlist witnesses to their pious acts (1 Thess. 2:10; Mt. 23:5). He comes very close to calling himself, together with his companions, a father to his children (1 Thess. 2:11).

And yet to focus only on Paul’s almost annoying manner of listing his great triumphs and tragic hardships is to miss his point. For he asks nothing of anyone that he does not readily do himself, nor does he ascribe anything to himself that is not based on the gospel or his commitment to his friends in the churches. Paul’s claim to authority rests upon Christ alone, not upon any display of dedication.

Joshua 3:7-17 underscores this last point in its reminder of the true cornerstone of all human authority. The time has come for Joshua to replace Moses as the leader of the Israelites. So God says to the new commander: “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” (Josh. 3:7). The Greek word in the Septuagint for “exalt,” is the same word for “exalt” found in the Greek text of Mt. 23:12. Only God who will do the exalting of God’s leaders; only God provides the authority upon which its human forms are founded.

## **THE SERVICE: SUGGESTIONS FOR PENTECOST 23**

**Call to Worship** (based on Psalm 107)

Leader: From the desert wastelands of our lives,

from places where we have hungered  
and thirsted for the deliverance of God,  
let us come together;

**People:** From darkness and gloom, prison and  
hard labor, let us come out;

Leader: From disease and affliction, from the  
very gates of death that have threatened  
to shut us in, let us come forward;

**People:** From storm and wind, rain and flood, let  
us come before God;

Leader: And let us together shout to the One  
who has delivered us from all evil and  
pain:

**People:** “O give thanks to the Lord, for he is  
good; his steadfast love endures  
forever!”

### **Prayer of Confession**

God of the Pharisees, we confess that we can be counted a member of the company so firmly scolded by Jesus. We likewise have been given a priceless treasure in the gospel, but we have turned it into a heavy burden which no one can lift. We also do many things only so that others will see them and think well of us; we are too strongly attached to human flattery and praise. And even as we ourselves do these things, we ungraciously attribute such actions and motivations to others. We blame first-century Jewish groups for our own wrongdoings; we complain about the hypocrisy and vainglory of our neighbors that we have acted out so frequently.

Yet you, O God, remain the God of all people—of hypocrites, of the proud, the vain, the ostentatious. And you freely offer your forgiveness to all who will drop their pretensions and turn to you. It is into this company that we ask you to bring us. For we pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

### **Assurance of Pardon**

“Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens,” says Jesus, “and I will give you rest” (Mt. 11:28). We are forgiven; the old baggage need no longer be carried. The new burden, much lighter, much easier, awaits. Let us this day choose Jesus’ yoke so that we may live as people who have received the grace he has so freely offered.

### **Offertory Sentence**

Paul boldly reminds the Thessalonian church of his labor and toil on behalf of the gospel, on behalf of his brothers and sisters in the faith. He dares to be so forthright because he knows they were witnesses to his faithfulness and righteousness when he was among them. Who will witness to our steadfastness when we are absent? If we are not willing to make the sacrifices

Paul made, to give what we can as he did, there will be no testimony. Let our offerings today be an affirmation of our commitment to the same gospel, the same Christ preached by Paul so long ago.

### Hymn Suggestions

“Let All Things Now Living” (ASH GROVE)

“Be Thou My Vision” (SLANE)

“Take My Gifts” (TALAVERA TERRACE)

“Come and Find the Quiet Center” (BEACH SPRING)

### STORIES AND IMAGES

- The story of the parting of the Jordan River through the power of the ark, as recounted in Joshua 3, makes me uncomfortable, especially on this Reformation Sunday. Like most Protestants I am an iconoclast. I do not believe that God’s power resides in things nor do they provide special access to it. I have been befuddled about how to interpret this text in a modern community of faith that has rejected the notion that a box has the near-magic capability to disturb the natural flow of a river. So how are we to preach this ancient symbol?

As I considered this question a comment by Robert G. Boling and G. Ernest Wright caught my attention. The way in which Joshua 3:7-17 was finally redacted leads them to suggest that “what had always been most important about the Ark was not its alleged wonderworking power, but . . . its covenantal function—that is, creating unity without destroying diversity.” (Robert G. Boling and G. Ernest Wright, Joshua, *The Anchor Bible*, 181.) In other words, to both ancient Israelites and modern Christians the primary significance in the ark does not lie in magic but in its power as a symbol of unity.

- Their observation in turn reminds me of my encounter with Sister Nectaria, an Orthodox nun from Greece, concerning the power of icons to bring us closer to God. I met her when she came to our seminary campus in Taiwan to participate in a two-week conference on Asian music and liturgy. Just her appearance caused quite a stir among our largely Protestant crowd. Swathed from head to toe in black, like an Iranian woman in her chador, only her face expressed her profound devotion to God and to the people around her, her strong intellect, her ebullient spirit. She came to the conference to explain Orthodox worship. In the process she emphasized the significance of icons in Orthodox spirituality, though I doubt that any of us rushed out to obtain and use our own in our private or corporate worship.

She and I became friends when she asked me to assist in her preparations for lectures and liturgies. At the end of her stay she brought me a small gift for helping her—a miniature iconic diptych. Christ the Pantocrator gazed firmly upon the beholder on one side; on the other Mary and her man-child Jesus looked serenely into an unseen reality. “I know you don’t really appreciate the reverence in which we hold these objects,” said Sister Nectaria. “But when you look at this, say a prayer for me. And when I look at one I have that is similar to this, I will pray for you. And in doing this for one another we can be united.”

- In several books Roberta Bondi carries on a remarkable dialogue with the church fathers and mothers of the fourth through the sixth centuries about significant issues in the Christian life. She retells the following story on the theme of humility:

A priest of Pelusia heard it said of some brethren that they often went to the city, took baths, [and did not act like monks]. He went to [their worship service] and took [their monastic clothes] away from them. Afterwards, his heart was moved, he repented and went to see Abba Poemen, obsessed by his thoughts. He brought the monastic habits of the brothers and told him all about it. The old man said to him, “Don’t you sometimes have something of the old Adam in you?” The priest said, “I have my share of the old Adam.” The Abba said to him, “Look, you are just like the brethren yourself; if you have even a little share of the old Adam, then you are subject to sin in the same way.” So the priest went and called the brothers and asked their pardon . . .—Roberta Bondi, *To Love As God Loves*, 53.

### THE SERMON: AN APPROACH

On a rainy Sunday morning a handful of people straggled into the chapel to participate in the early service. Dismayed by the small crowd of twenty or so, I glanced frequently at the back door, hoping that just a few more people would come to hear me preach. We sang the opening hymn—no one else walked in. We invoked the presence of God—no one came. We recited a psalm, confessed our sins, heard the scripture lessons—no one entered. When at last I heard myself introduced as a recent seminary graduate, winner of the preaching prize—“even beat out the boys,” my host enthused—I swallowed my vanity wounded by such a minuscule turn-out and stood up to preach the gospel.

Little did I know, so many years ago, that there would come a time when I would preach regularly to an even tinier group. Every Sunday afternoon our little English-speaking congregation

of Christians in non-Christian Taiwan hopes against hope that such a great crowd as twenty might actually show up. How the mighty (at least in her own mind) has been humbled, I mused last week as I waited for just one more straggler before beginning our worship. For all those years ago I had set out to become a religious authority, esteemed by one and all; and look where I had ended up.

Apparently the religious authorities that Jesus is scolding in the gospel lesson today did not know the sting of unrealized ambition or unnoticed ability. Those Pharisees are the people who live on the other side of the fence where the grass is much greener. And, in Matthew's remembrance of Jesus' criticism of the Pharisees, they sought after and received far more glory than was due them. If we are honest with ourselves, we must admit that we too have craved that kind of recognition. We too have lusted after public honors and awards, the biggest salary, the grandest title, the longest list of accomplishments.

Yet in spite of our secret dreams, most of us do not get these things. Most of us work day in and day out, attending to the duties of our lives with little expectation that anyone will notice or make a fuss over us. So when we hear the last verse from today's text in Matthew, we may not hear the threat at the beginning such much as we hear the promise at the end. "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted" (Mt. 23:12). And we may be tempted to respond, "OK, Jesus, everyone else has been exalted—when is it my turn?"

I think Joshua, son of Nun, may have wondered the same thing while he was in the wilderness with the Israelites, watching Moses exercise all the authority. He appears in the story quite early, in Exodus 17, but serves quietly throughout the forty years of wandering in the desert. He patiently does the odd jobs required of him, never complaining against Moses, never leaving the straight-and-narrow way. Perhaps as a young man he too had dreams and ambitions far loftier than the reality of his middle years.

As an apprentice religious authority so many years ago, I myself had great plans for my life. I was going to feed the hungry, but found myself breaking up food fights at summer youth camps. I was going to win souls for Christ, but found myself

in endless Evangelism Committee meetings discussing colors for publicity fliers. I was going to teach all that Jesus had commanded, but found myself emphasizing the importance of the Greek participle to a classroom of bored seminary students. And through it all I too yearned for the respectful title, the place of honor at the banquet, the shout of recognition in the marketplace.

Not until after Moses had died does Joshua finally hear the words directly from the mouth of God: "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" (Josh. 3:7). Yet as great a moment as that may have been for him, Joshua probably already knew what I am learning, what all of us are learning as we go about the daily work of God. God's exaltation, the kind that Jesus talks about, does not come through thunderous human acclaim or even audible divine voices from heaven.

For God's exaltation arrives in moments too often unrecognized and unremarked. When two people perceive the kindred spirit in one another and laugh together—God exalts us. When a student finally understands some profound truth that the teacher has been struggling to convey—God exalts us. When a child discovers the joy of sharing with others—God exalts us. When a sincere thank you is uttered, a true gift is offered, a hidden talent is contributed—in all these things God exalts us. And if we are busy looking for the best seat in the house, we will miss it and be sadly impoverished for our inattention. Ultimately any authority that we may have as Christians, or as religious leaders, rests upon the faith that God can use us and so exalt us if we stop seeking after the human signs of honor. It may well be a difficult lesson for many of us to learn—I know it is for me. But in the moments when we grasp its truth, God will indeed say to us as God once said to Joshua, "This day I will begin to exalt you." And Jesus will echo, "and the humble will be exalted." Let it be so. Amen.

---

*Nancy Claire Pittman is Assistant Professor of New Testament,  
Tainan Theological College and Seminary, Tainan, Taiwan.*



Liturgical Publications, Inc., 2875 S. James Drive, New Berlin, WI 53151  
(800) 876-4574 (414) 785-1188