

**12 NOON Holy Eucharist (Spanish liturgy)**  
**(Isa 1:2-4, 16-20, Ps 50:7-15,22-24, Mt 23:1-12)**

**The Rev. Leslie Nunez Steffensen**  
**Tuesday, February 23**

### **Matthew 23:1-12**

#### **Problem in the Text**

The passage for today from St. Matthew's Gospel is a very bitter pill for anyone who would like to lead. Jesus tells the crowd, "The teachers of the Law and the Pharisees are the authorized interpreters of Moses' Law. So you must obey and follow everything they tell you to do; do not, however, imitate their actions, because they don't practice what they preach (v3.)" In other words, these religious leaders may be doing very sound scholarship, but they are hypocrites because they do not live according to the demands upon others that they preach. Instead, these religious leaders are layering themselves with the trappings of status and authority.

"They do everything so that people will see them. Look at the straps with scripture verses on them which they wear on their foreheads and arms, and notice how large they are! Notice also how long are the tassels on their cloaks! They love the best places at feasts and the reserved seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to have people call them 'Teacher' (vv.5-7.)"

I won't go into the titles Jesus tells us not to take up. I am sure "Reverend" would have been on his list had it been in the vernacular of his day. That is because you can feel the tug of pride that it can wrap you with. I am guilty of it – I banked a lot on making the grade, passing GOE's and successfully jumping through all of the hoops in order to get to graduation and to my ordination day. But is that what I feast upon? Is my status and the honor of being a priest my end all, be all?"

#### **Problem in the World**

Of course, this is a dangerous passage to read at seminary. I've been in your shoes both as staff and student, and it would be easy to say "AHA!" at plenty of people around here. But really, as soon as you or I have that impulse, we need to turn the finger towards ourselves and examine through Christ's eyes, what we see.

As ones who strive to serve as leaders in the Church, the admonition about the teachers of the Law and Pharisees is really a warning for us. Who among us doesn't strive for status and an invitation to a feast at the Deanery? We all would "love the best places at feasts and the reserved seats, would "love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to have people call us by a term of respect such as "teacher" or "reverend."

Last year, Pope Francis wrote an interesting address to Christians at the beginning of Lent. I think it echoes Jesus' appraisal in St. Matthew's Gospel of how the teachers and the Pharisees conduct their holy business. Pope Francis wrote, "Indifference to our neighbor and to God... represents a real temptation for us Christians. Each year during Lent we need to hear once more the voice of the prophets who cry out and trouble our conscience."

Describing this phenomenon he calls the *globalization of indifference*, Francis wrote that “whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God’s voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades.” He wrote that, “We end up being incapable of feeling compassion at the outcry of the poor, weeping for other people’s pain, and feeling a need to help them, as though all this were someone else’s responsibility and not our own.”<sup>i</sup>

### **Grace in the Text**

I think this is precisely what Jesus was driving at when he admonished the behavior of the teachers and Pharisees. Their puffery insulated them from having to deal with the issues and plight of the poor and the suffering. It was a cloak of indifference that surrounded them and made them feel set apart and above, better than their neighbor. Jesus called his followers to turn away from the impulse to use gifts and blessings to be apart, and to turn toward those in need – to use good fortune of education, wealth and power as giftedness to use toward the care and concern for others, to improve the lives of our neighbors.

Jesus told the crowd, “The greatest one among you must be your servant. Whoever makes himself great will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be made great (vv.11-12.)”

### **Grace in the World**

Pope Francis has called the faithful to consider a new kind of fast. “...When we fast from...indifference, we can begin to feast on love. In fact, Lent is the perfect time to learn how to love again. Jesus—the great protagonist of this holy season—certainly showed us the way. In him, God descends all the way down to bring everyone up. In his life and his ministry, no one is excluded.”<sup>ii</sup> In other words, we all become exalted when we serve as Christ served.

Lent is all about allowing ourselves to be transformed by Christ. We take a fast from those things that make us feel fat on the world, and turn our attention to those things which help us feast on Christ and all of the things that the kingdom values: love of our neighbor, concern for the poor, a deeper relationship with God. If we turn our fast into such a feast, I think we will be transformed individually and as a community. The impulses which might push us to sin in our pride can become the very gifts that turn us and transform us into the people, the servants, Christ calls us to be.

Amen.

---

<sup>i</sup> As found in <http://time.com/3714056/pope-francis-lent-2015-fasting/>

<sup>ii</sup> Christopher J. Hale in “Pope Francis’ Guide to Lent: What You Should Give Up This Year” Feb 18, 2015.