

CHARACTER ACTING

WHEN ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE

A HOMILY PREACHED AT SAINT JOHN'S PARISH, OCTOBER 30, 2005
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Texts appointed for Pentecost XXIV, Year A, Proper 26:

First Lesson: Micah 3:5-12

Thus says the LORD concerning the prophets who lead my people astray, who cry "Peace" when they have something to eat, but declare war against those who put nothing into their mouths. Therefore it shall be night to you, without vision, and darkness to you, without revelation. The sun shall go down upon the prophets, and the day shall be black over them; the seers shall be disgraced, and the diviners put to shame; they shall all cover their lips, for there is no answer from God. But as for me, I am filled with power, with the spirit of the LORD, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin. Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob and chiefs of the house of Israel, who abhor justice and pervert all equity, who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with wrong! Its rulers give judgment for a bribe, its priests teach for a price, its prophets give oracles for money; yet they lean upon the LORD and say, "Surely the LORD is with us! No harm shall come upon us." Therefore because of you Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height.

The Gospel: Matthew 23:1-12

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. They 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. They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father-- the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

... therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach.

We've all seen the play by now. Not on Broadway, but the Beltway. It's an all-star cast with names like Valerie and Joe, George W. and Carl, Dick and "Scooter," and Patrick.

By week's end from Washington, all eyes and ears were fixed on the latest grand jury investigation; with the same kinds of questions typically sought. This time it was the special prosecutors two-year investigation into the leak of classified information, the "outing" of a CIA agent.

Someone said something to someone for some reason. What did who know, and when did they know it? Or -- more to the point, in this case -- what did who say, and when did they say it? The underlying question in

this real, live drama filled with a powerful cast of characters, big stars and 2-bit actors: their words don't match their actions; what they did or didn't do doesn't jibe with what they said they did or didn't do.

As Washington scandals go, once again, the old scenario seems to repeat itself: perhaps the cover up will turn out to be worse than the original crime. In the words of the Bard, "Oh what a tangled web we weave"

Well -- interestingly enough -- in an ancient scripture text this morning there's a story about rulers in charge willing to take bribes in judgment cases, and smooth-talking soothsayers willing to tell you anything you want to hear, for a price. And a gospel passage reiterates the idea that people ought to do what they say, and say what they do.

We all know the maxims: Do as I say, not as I do. Or, actions speak louder than words. And, practice what you preach; that is, of course, unless you're a preacher, and *preaching* is what you *practice*! Nevertheless, we all get the point; even in religious circles.

Words are fine, and what you say is all well and good. After all, we say a lot of things in an hour each Sunday morning. But if you don't back it up with some tangible, verifiable expression of what you say you believe, then -- in the words of another part of scripture -- your faith is a dead, useless thing (James. 2:17). So, as we like to say, it's not so much what we say on Sunday morning in rehearsal, as what we do with what we've said throughout the rest of the week.

But here we are: Sincere people of faith, honest as the day is long, with nary a word uttered or deed done that wasn't the gospel truth. Right? OK, try this on for size:

Spiritually-speaking the notion of "having faith" is not a possessive thing to carry around in your pocket, like a religious ID card; just in case someone should stop you on the street and ask you to recite the Apostle's Creed, the Ten Commandments, or Catechism. It is less a matter of "having faith" -- or even "keeping the faith" -- as it is a matter of spreading it around, as if it is something you can only do; not something you can tuck away.

Faith, as scripture says and we believe, is a gift; but it's not a gift *certifica te*, to be redeemed whenever the need arises. It expires, just as we do ourselves, if left unused. So how do we use our faith, act out our faith, to do whatever it is we do? How do we act our way into becoming the faith we follow, instead of merely spout words?

The ancient prophet Micah does utter harsh words to say about “prophets who lead the people astray,” and about the “rulers of the house of Jacob and chiefs of the house of Israel.” Not only do they say one thing, while doing another; they’re all on the take. The “rulers give judgments for a bribe, priests teach for a price, and the prophets will prophecy and sell you an oracle” for the price of a lottery ticket.

Matthew’s Jesus echoes the same message in today’s gospel passage, but this time its directed at the “scribes and the Pharisees.” In Jesus’ day, the Pharisees were not the religious leaders with temple authority, but a lay movement in Judaism. In other words, they were the people in the pew. And the scribes were, at best, low-level officials.

What this means is Jesus takes Micah’s pointed, accusatory finger and directs it not just at the easy, big-shot targets of who’s tops in sanctimonious, self-righteous piety. His words are leveled at anyone in the “crowds and his own disciples” to whom he himself preached. He chastised anyone who failed to do as they taught others to do; that is, those who put on a character that not only exceeded their acting ability, but for which they were poorly cast.

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Elsewhere in the gospels he calls them hypocrites (Greek, meaning *actor*). Now as we often hear, that’s a popular, disparaging and dismissive term used by non-church going types to describe us religious types as failing to practice what we preach; as if we didn’t realize this long ago in ourselves. Why else would we return week after week, to admit it, confess it, and strive to match our actions with the good intentions we espouse?

“In thought, word and deed,” we say, “we have done those things we ought not to have done, and failed to do as we should have and meant to do.” It is not out-of-character for honest hypocrites to be faithful churchgoers. To the contrary, it may be the only thing that distinguishes us from those who don’t, or won’t, admit the same to themselves; let alone to God, a confessor, a congregation, or even a grand jury.

I think of all the characters we have at a place like Saint John’s; how well suited you are for all your bit parts. For instance, I review the cast of characters listed on a particular Sunday in the theater program, which we call the Sunday bulletin.

I think of the lector who’ll deliver the Word, or the one who has pressed the linens, or dusted the cobwebs. I’ll think of the one who’s kneaded the dough, or strums the chords, or even counts the shekels much-needed for the temple treasury. I’ll think of the one who’ll scour the coffee pots, unlock the doors, sweep the walk or turn off the heat. How well suited are you to play the part? Characteristically speaking, how well cast are you?

But more so, I’ll also think of the acts of loving kindness, the unseen gestures of a behind-the-scenes kind of faith that couldn’t be bought or bribed at any price; those simple acts of faith in the wings, not merely words of faith delivered on stage. From the critic’s corner, how would you review our little drama, relative to some other, high-visibility performances?

It is helpful to remember, in all the words attributed to our Lord, with all his “sayings” (whether borrowed or original), in all his teachings, with everything he said, he was first and foremost a healer and miracle worker; who, in the end, did not merely instruct us about laying down and losing one’s life to find it, but showed us how. Some might call him a larger-than-life action-hero figure.

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As the cast of characters in Washington undertake another leak investigation into who said what to whom, and when, I can’t help but hear in the empty halls of judicial prudence a distant echo of those lines once written by the Bard; the words from *Macbeth* about those who “strut and fret their hour upon the stage,” about “a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” Or, at least, nothing of any real significance.

Instead, here, we can conduct our own self-investigation into how well each character plays the part in actually living out a gospel faith that isn’t classified at all; and whose only possible offense may lie in not leaking it and letting it out when you hear the casting call.

It’s good to learn and rehearse the lines. When all is said and done, it helps to say what you know, and how you know it. It’s important what you say, and how you say it. But most important – according to our director and producer -- it’s what you do, and how you do it.

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