

23rd Sunday after Pentecost; Proper 26A
Sermon 11.5.23

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. (206)

We’re in the last week of his life. Jesus, now in Jerusalem, and daily in the Temple, is just days away from his crucifixion, which he knows at this point.

It’s always an open question as to whether Jesus knew this whole thing would end in his crucifixion—and if he knew, when he *first* knew. Each of the four gospel writers seems to have had a different idea about that. John seems to think Jesus, as Christ, knew before the beginning of time. Matthew and Mark both remember Jesus as still a little incredulous that it’s come to this, asking even from the cross, his last moments: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

All that said, the driving point for Jesus coming to Jerusalem in the first place, for entering the Temple with such provocation: it was to confront the authorities, which he knew would draw their fire. It would have them accusing him of sedition, which would have them hand him over to the Romans, which would have them crucify him, a cascade of injustice that no one quite commits. You know how bureaucracies can be—just doing their jobs, just following orders.

We’re in the last week of his life—in Jerusalem, in the Temple.

Interesting that he seems less worried about himself and more worried about his disciples and the people who make up the crowd.

He’s warning them about whom to follow and how.

For what it’s worth, all the scripture readings for this Sunday are concerned with leadership.

As you may know, every Sunday of the church year features several sorts of readings from scripture from which a preacher is then to choose. It’s too much to include them all—Old Testament, New Testament, Gospel, Psalm. Often the readings seem like a grab-bag of good

points. Sometimes, they're in loose conversation with one another. Every once in a while, they're about basically the same thing.

This week: leadership. Who's in charge, and how to tell, and whether to trust.

In the one Old Testament passage, Moses, that great leader, has died and Joshua has taken his place. He would lead the people where Moses couldn't go, into the Promised Land. The Lord would make it clear to the people that Joshua was worthy of their following.

In the other Old Testament text, Micah, a half millennium later: he would prophesy at the time of the prophets. But he would do it as someone not born into the job. He was like a kid at a selective school surrounded by legacy admissions, students who got in because of who their parents are. Being a prophet was a formal role in society, and Micah had earned his way into it. He'd proven himself. But now he was disillusioned, not to mention enraged. He was disgusted by what cynicism and vanity he found among his fellow prophets. They saw to their own needs before seeing to the needs of the people. They were pleasant if they'd been pampered enough, but they got mean if they were made to suffer even a little bit. But the people listened to them. They trusted. They followed. People can be like that, following whomever bears the most compelling signs of authority, whether or not it all proves true.

In the New Testament text, Paul speaks to the church in Thessalonica, with whom he spent but a little time and long ago. He begs them to remember him well, to trust that he'd held himself to a high standard in order that those new to the faith might find their way in safely and kindly. He'd done right by them, he assured them. He'd been trustworthy, he urged upon them to remember.

In the Gospel text, we find Jesus in the last week of his life. Having provoked Pharisees, and then Sadducees, and even scribes and elders and chief priests, he'd ticked off every one of the many groups he'd been saying for a long time now would hand him over for persecution and even crucifixion. He'd been saying they would kill him, and so he seemed a partner in making it happen. Yet at this moment, he seems more worried about the people who'd come to follow him, had come to regard him as their teacher, themselves as his disciples, which is to say his students—more worried about them than about himself.

He would be leaving them—and they would be without their teacher, and who knows to whom they'd turn then to trust. It could be anybody. It could be even these people who dress the part—their phylacteries broad, their fringes long, which the longer the fringe the greater the piety

and the more obvious the worthiness. Like the shinier the shark skin suit, the better the lawyer, right? Those fringes sure were long!

I wonder if you've ever followed someone because they looked the part? A best friend in middle school who was just nice enough to you to keep you on a leash. A teammate in high school who'd coach you to improve but, when the real moment came, would undermine your effort. A professor in higher education who cheered your success until you started becoming more his equal, now a competitor, someone whom you'd modeled yourself after but now took you as a rival. That can happen: our models can become our rivals. A boss who proved unworthy of the authority? A member of your book club? A pastor or priest whom you thought you could trust...?

Our church book club is reading Peter Gomes' *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Heart and Mind*. Peter Gomes was the longtime minister at Harvard University and preacher at Harvard's Memorial Church. As a group, we're finding a lot in this book worthy of remembering and coming better to understand in conversation. One thing that has stayed most with me is his supposing that the problem of this late modern age in which we live and move and struggle to have our being is not that we trust too little but that we trust too much. The problem isn't that we're entirely too skeptical, and of anything and everything, but that we're entirely too credulous.

Gomes writes: "We are not too stingy, as the conventional wisdom goes; we are too generous, too trusting, and thus over and over again we give away our hearts and our trust to that which is not worthy of them." As if, with no one common creed in our go-your-own-way culture, we'll strike up with any old creed, and we'll follow almost anyone, though without really noticing that's what we're doing because the one thing we seem to believe in most of all is our own independence, our own ability to self-make and self-express, to strike upon what is desirable and to go about getting it without any influence from forces beyond our own self.

This is untrue. This belief in our own self-generation, in our own self-generated desire: this is untrue. It is rather that we want what we are taught to want, desire a rather more catchy thing.

Hence that 10th commandment, cautioning against such greedy suggestibility: do not covet your neighbor's goods. Do not even want what others have. We wouldn't need the commandment if we didn't suffer the tendency of its opposite.

Almost everything of ourselves we have caught from someone else. So the crucial question in our lives is therefore this: from whom do we want to catch our lives?

I seem to remember reading somewhere an article advocating the offering of college courses in following—the art of following. The writer was himself affiliated with academia (I seem

to remember the writer as a man) and he'd noticed how colleges had so uncritically and universally embraced the notion that their task was to bring up the next generation of leaders for society. The rhetoric from admissions offices seemed unanimously to speak of seeking applicants with leadership qualities, promising to accept into enrollment those applicants who show potential for leadership, all to stock their graduating classes with leaders, down to the one.

This writer, though, pointed out that just as important as knowing how to lead is knowing how to follow. Because, really, most of us will spend more of the time we have in this world following in ongoing efforts than in taking the lead, making it so the art of following is as crucial as leading is.

Well, I love when someone speaks against the prevailing orthodoxies of the day, so this lone cry has stuck with me, though attempts to find it again haven't born fruit. A society full of leaders who'd be loathe ever to follow isn't going to be much of a society for long. If a society is a gathering and working together of neighboring people, a giving of yourself to a larger web of relationships for a communal goal of mutual wellbeing, then a society in which everyone feels entitled to lead and wouldn't dream of ever being seen as a follower is going to have a rough go of it.

How, then, to follow? How to discern whom to follow, in what effort to join in? How to understand your fellow followers, when its best to speak up with your own idea and when its best to listen and take in someone else's plan?

We recently had to close the boathouse for the season. A rower, I met up with my clubmates at the shore of Onota Lake yesterday. We had to clean some boats, pull in the dock, dispose of garbage that had gathered over the six-month season. It was a good turn out: probably thirty rowers, spanning the ages of seventeen to seventy-five. It was mostly productive chaos. For forty-five minutes I'd find a little thing here to do, and then a little thing there to do, lending a hand wherever one could be productively lent, all while a few would-be leaders though clashed in defining whatever task there was to and gathering whatever help there was to do it.

I finally left because I knew I couldn't effectively lead in that situation (believe me: I've tried in the past) and I also couldn't figure out how effectively to follow. With little to do, I got cold. So I went to the chapel office to print out the bulletins.

I wonder what would be required reading in the curriculum for the art of following. I wonder if it would somehow include what Jesus taught here. Beginning with a word of encouragement—that those in charge certainly do have something to offer (“Do what they

teach...”)—Jesus encourages that we’re also right to probe a little further, that we’re wise to wonder about the deeper worthiness of such as these. Long fringes noted, it’s good also to notice that they do not practice as they teach and therefore shouldn’t be the model for our living, only our tutor, if you will, from time to time.

Beyond that, Jesus goes on to envision efforts in living that are less hierarchical, more cooperative, having the disciples and the crowd gathered remember that there is one teacher, one model for how to live, and it is Jesus whether he himself is alive among them as person or as spirit, one whose body is mystical and enacted among them. “...you have one teacher,” Matthew’s gospel remembers him to have said, Matthew’s gospel being particularly moved by Jesus as a teacher. “...you have one teacher, and you are all students,” he goes on to say. “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.”

This politics that Jesus encourages here, this gathering of people set to living their lives together: this without hierarchy, this co-op effort: this is one of the most challenging modes of all, let’s be clear. We might think this sounds nice and who wouldn’t want that? But the dynamics it sets in motion are challenging indeed. Always to have to revisit the questions of who is in charge and why and whether that person is worthy or whether it’s time for someone else, whether the one moment has past and now it’s someone else’s moment to rise to—these questions writ large and writ small are challenging because what Jesus imagines is a politics in which they’re never laid to rest, in which these questions are never settled once and for all.

I will (I dare say) rightly occupy this pulpit and speak what I’ve prepared to say. But then that moment will pass and another moment will arrive and I won’t know the answer to whatever is the question because it’s about something other than what I’ve prepared myself to know. Someone else will rightly rise to take the lead, and it will be my task to turn from leading to joining in to follow.

But it’s so much easier to act as if it will always be that one, that we never have to wonder these most difficult wonderings: whom to trust and why, to whom to listen and whom to follow and for how long until it’s some other moment?

So, God has given us someone whom always to trust, even when what he’s entrusted us with is challenging indeed. This is what’s meant when Jesus is confessed, as in Handel’s Messiah, as this one: “King of kings and Lord of lords...and the government shall be upon his shoulders...”

He is the one around whom we are always rightly oriented and of whom we are always rightly attentive. With love as his central commandment and with service of the other and not of himself as always his mode, his is an authority that we can always trust. His is a modeling that we can ever imitate though never to be caught in a destructive covetousness. He will never punish us for becoming too much like him. He will never turn on us for becoming better at being him than he ever was. “You will do these things,” he’s remembered to have said of the sorts of things he did, acts of mercy, enactments of lovingkindness that he’s testified to have done. “You will do these things, and even greater things than these.”

A course on followership: I doubt very much this will become the most popular major at colleges across the land. I mean all you need for a feasibility study on such an endeavor is to peek into any church anywhere in the world, peek in and see how very empty are the pews. The church has forever been a course in the art of following—and, I’m very sorry to have to say, sometimes only ironically so. Many are the priests whom no one should follow. Many are the preachers who resemble dictators, if petty ones, more than they resemble Christ. The church indeed has been a breeding ground for the very sorts of leaders Jesus cautioned against, and has fostered the sort of followers Jesus worried his lovely people would become.

Sheep, sheep led even to the slaughter.

This is how meekly some would follow, and maybe even how you have at some point followed in your life.

For this vulnerability among his lovely people, Jesus would worry more for them as his tortured death loomed than for himself, though he was the one who’d be tortured this time.

Well, we are these lovely people now. We are the ones whom Jesus loves, whom God desires. That’s us. So, we must take care in our following. We must beware of those who’d take advantage. We must also pay attention to when the moment comes and we find that the truth lies within us and it’s time to take the lead, whether in great ways or in small.

That moment is coming. That moment is coming around to you. There will come that moment when your leadership is essential, and our following is a gracious necessity, and thus we will know anew how to move together in pursuit of truth, in practice of love, in following in the way.

So, pay attention. Such a moment is coming.

Thanks be to God.