

Proper 26 Year A
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Preached @ St. Christopher's, Roseville, MN 10/30/11

Joshua 3:7-17
1 Thess. 2:9-13
Matt 23:1-12

It is one of those things that we hardly take notice of, its presence in our Sunday liturgy is so familiar and so brief that for the most part it is over almost as soon as it began and we are off to the next thing, but this morning I would like to spend a little bit of time with it, amplifying its message and focusing on its importance. I am speaking of the collect of the day, that brief and today it is exceptionally brief, prayer that seems at times to be wedged in between the Gloria and the First Reading. We rarely linger with it, we are a people at work during the liturgy and we need to keep moving, on through the lessons, on through the music, on to the table, and out the door. But this morning I invite you to linger with me and explore how this brief prayer leads us into the center of today's gospel reading and more importantly leads us into that reading's call for as members of the body of Christ.

So, I invite you to pick up your service bulletin and find the collect and listen. . .

Almighty and merciful God, it is only by your gift that your faithful people offer you true and laudable service: Grant that we may run without stumbling to obtain your heavenly promises: through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit one God, now and forever. Amen.

It is only by your gift that your faithful people offer you true and laudable service. Only by your gift. True and laudable service. Let's leave the collect for just a moment and move to today's gospel from Matthew. We have spent the latter part of the summer and early fall listening to Jesus explain what is needed in order to not only bring about the kingdom here on earth, but also instructions on how to live in community. The lessons have been forthright "Love your neighbor as yourself" and difficult at the same time, "love **ALL** your neighbors as yourself." And yet there has always been the promise that this new normal, this effort to bring into reality God's kingdom here on earth, this new way of living in community has been given to us by our Heavenly Father. "*It is only by your gift . . .*" Today, Matthew moves us further into living in

community with warnings and advice on how to view the Pharisees in the temple. His advice is succinct, do what they teach, not what they do. There is nothing wrong with the lessons of Moses, the lesson of the Hebrew faith are good and true. Remember the reading last week told of how Jesus referred to the law as found in scripture to answer the question “what is the most important commandment?” It is how the Pharisees are delivering those lessons, the way they present themselves, their dress, and their actions that are problematic. Although they speak of glorifying God, their actions suggest that they are more interested in self promotion. Their dress re enforces this self image. Phylacteries were an interesting choice of accessory. They were small leather boxes strapped to the arm or in some cases forehead, which would be even harder to miss, containing parchment containing Biblical texts. Wearing such an accessory would seem to underscore the pious nature of the wearer. The same could be said for the length of the fringes on one’s prayer shawl. Add to this the fact that burdens referred to by Matthew are an over complicated set of rules needed to be followed in order to follow the laws and you can be to see what Jesus was referring to. Do what the teachers teach, follow the laws of Moses, the gift given by God that leads to *faithful people offering God true and laudable service*. Steer clear of the temptation to self promote, to stand apart and above others, to claim to be more worthy. It is not the teachings and laws of Moses that are problematic, it is the way in which they are being taught that is the issue. Writing in *Feasting on the Word*, Timothy Beach-Verhy indicates that it is all too easy to confuse our interests with God’s purpose. “Pious words and orthodox convictions alone do not a make a person faithful.” And not only do such words and actions fail to make one faithful, they stand as a barrier to fulfilling our call to bring about God’s kingdom. St. Augustine wrote “Pride is a perverted imitation of God. For pride hates fellowship of equality under God and seeks to impose its own dominion on fellow men, in the place of God’s rule.” With the actions and words of one group setting themselves above the rest it impossible to honor one of the basic components of God’s kingdom, that we are all valued and loved equally by our Father. We, as a faith community need to remember that not only is the capacity *to offer true and laudable service* a gift from God to us sitting in the pew and hearing/reading this collect, it is a gift given to all of God’s children. Those who currently worship with us here at St. Christopher’s and the faces of the those we do not yet know, faces that belong to not only those who are outwardly blessed but the faces of the marginalized as well. The move toward radical hospitality requires that we open our hearts, our space and our community to all our neighbors,

those who gifts aren't yet known to us, but who are *as* beloved as children of God, as we are. Don't set yourselves up to be seated in choice seats at temple, to be called Rabbi, for there is really only one teacher, really only one Father, the one in heaven and we have been instructed by the Messiah. Radical hospitality dictates that the greatest among us take on the role of servant and those who put themselves above all others will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted. And most importantly, the ability to take on the role of servant is in itself a gift from God as we *offer true and laudable service*.

It is too easy to get our own agendas not only mixed in with God's but to allow them to take place center stage. In our pursuit of the heavenly promises made to us by God, through Christ we allow our egos, our pride and our inclination to determine who is on top to pull our focus off what stretches out before us on our path, and yes you guessed it, we stumble. As beloved children of God we have been given the key if you will to the kingdom, which allows us to put our faith into action through service, *true and laudable service*. The gift of servant ministry is a gift that is not just given to a few select persons but rather is freely given to us all and in fact is at the core of our call as a people who have been washed in the waters of baptism. When we open our hearts and our community to all of God's children, welcoming them and inviting them into our servant ministry, we joyfully run without stumbling toward obtaining the heavenly promises that God has made us.