

Micah 3:5,9-12

⁵ 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.

⁹ Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob
and chiefs of the house of Israel,
who abhor justice

and pervert all equity,
¹⁰ who build Zion with blood
and Jerusalem with wrong!

¹¹ 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.”

¹² 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.

Matthew 23:1-12

23 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, ² “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; ³ therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. ⁴ They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, ^[a] and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. ⁵ They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make

their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. ⁶ They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, ⁷ and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. ⁸ But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. ^[b] ⁹ And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. ¹⁰ Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. ^[c] ¹¹ The greatest among you will be your servant. ¹² All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

Both Micah and Matthew vent frustration and threats of doom upon religious leaders who turn the Law of God into the Unbearable Burden of God's laws.

At a study group a Rabbi friend proposed a reason for how this happened. He asked us all to imagine a faithful believer who worked in a market coming and saying " I earnestly want to honor God and the Law says "Keep the Sabbath Holy" What can I do or not do on the Sabbath? " The Rabbi replied " Do not carry a load". " Define load for me, Rabbi"

He argued that the original intent had been to give pious people reasonable instruction which they could use in everyday life. But that it had quickly, and all too humanly, degenerated into a set of rules and regulations which became increasingly complex.

Rather than making religion a life-enhancing thing which liberates and enlarges those who practice it, the scribal rules made it a terrible burden which restricts and diminishes life. Secondly things which were intended to point towards the touchstones against which they were to measure their attitudes and actions became subverted: the phylacteries (scarfs) and fringes originally meant to remind their

wearers of the Law and Commandments now function instead as exterior and ostentatious signifiers of piety and an invitation to others to treat them with deference and respect.

Whilst the descriptions here are very historically and culturally specific, the underlying processes are ones which can play out in any age.

Unfortunately, it is very common for organizations, religious and otherwise, to drift away from their original core purpose and values. Especially as they become older and more settled. It is very easy for those called to leadership to fall in love with their power and privilege and to imagine themselves as more important than the tasks and duties to which they were called in the first place.

The scribes and Pharisees were known as the “Keepers of the Keys to the Kingdom” and one modern commentator accuses them of “Having hidden the Keys”.

“Keeper of the Keys” is still one of the Pope’s titles and at the time of the Reformation, which we remembered in last week’s worship,

” Hiding the keys” and laying burdens upon the people and being far far away from core principals and values was exactly what our forefathers objected to in the established church and was the main cause of the Reformation.

They took Jesus’s words:

“But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students.^[b] ⁹ And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. ¹⁰ Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah.^[c] ¹¹ The greatest among you will be your servant. ¹² All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

as the Biblical instruction to not have a church hierarchy and to preach the “priesthood of all believers”.

In our Presbyterian tradition my official title is “minister of Word & Sacrament” I am just an ordinary man who has received special training in preaching and officiating .I am no better a follower of Christ , in fact experience tells me I am worse, than any other. The clergy are in no way different or superior or separate.

To balance that “priesthood of all believers” means we elevate the individual ,the ordinary person. Being exceptional is not only very difficult ...it is unnecessary.

Today's Call to Worship is based on Psalm 43.It is a cry to God for help in which the writer uses “I” five times, “me” six times and “my” six times.

The Psalmist clearly believes that he is special and individual to God. That he deserves and will receive God's particular attention. He is not willing to be a face lost in the crowd, not merely a statistic, but someone who insists upon recognition and expects well-being.

It is not the building or the organizational structures or the super- stars who are the church. You, me the ordinary people ...we are the church.

On This All Saints day let us remember that and give thanks to God for all the women and men of our faith who through the ages have been faithful. Women and men who have not been exceptional but have followed their faith into every situation ,in every church and in every family and who are rightly called our Ordinary Heroes.

Amen.

