

Sermon for Sunday November 5, 2023

Paula Papky for MacNeill Church

Joshua 3:7-9, 11-17 Psalm 107:1-7, 33-37 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13

Matthew 23:1-12

Love is Little

In her book, *Grace (Eventually): Thoughts on Faith*, Anne Lamott writes about her problem with jealousy. Even in terms of her faith, she wants a higher seat; she worries that the gifts God gives others may cut down on her own. She writes, “I know that when someone gets a big slice, it doesn’t mean there’s none for me. In fact, I know that there isn’t even a pie, that there’s plenty to go around, enough food and love and air. But I don’t believe it for a second. I secretly believe there’s a pie. And I will go to my grave brandishing my fork.”

Me too, Anne, I think. Me too.

And so we come to this gospel lesson on humility and to Jesus’ criticism of the Pharisees. After the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE, the slaughter of the elite Temple priests and loss of the Temple, the Pharisees come to greater prominence. Their role is to provide leadership to the Judean people now scattered all over the Roman Empire, from Egypt to Turkey, to Greece, even Spain.

Matthew the gospel writer has ended up in Antioch in Syria and is writing his gospel sometime in the last decades of the first century. Roman fury against Judean rebels and upstart Christians burns hot. We’re at the beginning of decades of martyrs, of amphitheatres, of slaughter in combats, or by wild beasts, or by burning. What are these people of the Law of Moses to do to preserve their ancient faith? And what are the Jesus groups to do? Many of them still tried to follow the Law while also following Jesus. Enter, the Pharisees.

In Jesus’ day, long before Matthew’s gospel, he had many confrontations and arguments with the Pharisees. Matthew recounts many of these meetings in which the Pharisees try to trip Jesus up and shame him. And Jesus outwits them every time, shaming them. His main criticism is that the Pharisees are hypocrites. And in Matthew’s story, it’s reached the point where the Pharisees have given up trying to talk with Jesus at all. Their plans to shame him go underground and they secretly plan to kill Jesus.

In today’s story, Jesus addresses his disciples and the crowd of lowly people who are assembled. These are low status people trying to survive in a deeply stratified culture. His theme is humility. Jesus talks about leadership and about lowliness. He begins by saying, “Do not do as the Pharisees do for they do not practice what they teach.” It’s a stinging rebuke. We know how it stings when people speak of church goers as hypocrites, do we not?

The problem in Jesus' day and in Matthew's is rules. The original ten Laws of Moses have expanded been expanded by the Pharisees into 613 laws. They spelled out what could or could not be eaten; where and with whom one could eat; how to keep the Sabbath day holy. If one carried so much as a handkerchief on the Sabbath one was doing work, committing sin.

We know about burdensome rules in the Baptist convention, do we not? We are told we must exclude from church leadership a whole group of faithful Christians: 2SLGBTQ+ folks. And MacNeill persists in being a welcoming, affirming congregation. We believe that Jesus was sympathetic toward people who cried out for justice and mercy, rejecting conformity. He welcomed marginal people. His disciples are seen to pick grain on the Sabbath; to eat it outdoors with unwashed hands because they are hungry. He entered the homes of those considered unclean by the Pharisees: sex workers, beggars, the ill, tax collectors and other despised, lowly people. Jesus reached out in love to people on the margins. He taught by acting out what love looks like.

What is it the Pharisees love? They love to have the place of honour at banquets. Well, who wouldn't? Do we want to be seated near the back, by the kitchens, far from the head table? Jesus does! He's the one who sits down and eats with those who never dream of a place even in the back corner, much less at the banquet table. He was always teaching that the first will be last, the last will be first; that the hopeless will be embraced by God; that the children, the lowliest in that culture, should be allowed to come to Jesus.

And all the while, the Pharisees choose the best seats in synagogue. They love to be admired in the marketplace in their fine garb; love to have people call them rabbi, teacher. Jesus teaches his followers that they are not to love honour as the Pharisees do. He teaches that there is to be no elevated public rank within the new family he is forming. He says he, the Messiah, is the only teacher.

Here at MacNeill we have a shared ministry model, something we've been doing since 2010. We adopted this model to demonstrate that we are, all of us, brothers and sisters, committed to discerning together what is good and right and just and merciful. We are committed to a model of ministry that has all ages, all genders and sexual identities, all kinds of families and experiences. What keeps us going through tough times – like COVID – is remembering that we aren't called to make MacNeill and its ministry a smash hit or a box office success. We are called to faithfulness and devotion and love.

Somewhere in her writings (I've forgotten which book), Anne Lamott says that North Americans are never going to adopt the motto, *Humility R Us*. Let's face it: we find it hard to be humble. We'd secretly like to wear hats that say, MMGA – Make MacNeill Great Again. But here's the good news: Jesus spoke to the people who followed him, the people pushed

aside, excluded from the banquet table, saying, “All who exalt themselves will be humbled; and all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Whenever I sing today’s choir anthem, “Love is little, love is low,” I had goosebumps. It’s a song from the Quaker tradition that I think says it all. It’s printed on your bulletin cover and also in your on-line order of service. It’s the gospel truth, you might say. “Love is little, love is low.” Love is our humble offering. It’s not a competition. It’s a reaching out to people. It’s knowing that there’s enough of God’s love, grace and presence to go around. You won’t need your fork for communion. There’s no pie. There’s just a morsel of bread, a sip of juice, a humble meal taken in memory of Jesus Christ. Amen.