

SERMON TITLE: “The Nature of Greatness”
TEXT: Micah 3:5-12; Matthew 23:1-12
PREACHED AT: Lethbridge Mennonite Church
BY: Ryan Dueck
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On September 17, a group of protesters descended upon Zuccotti Park in the financial district of New York, and “Occupy Wall Street” was born.

A diverse collection of people assembled to protest social and economic inequality, corporate greed, and the power and influence exerted by corporations over government.

“We are the 99%!” This is the rallying cry heard in demonstrations around the world. People are fed up with a tiny percentage of the world’s population possessing and controlling an overwhelming amount of the world’s wealth and resources.

Over the last few weeks, the movement has spread to communities around the world, from big cities, to small towns. Everyone, it seems, wants to get in on the occupying 😊.

I’m going to resist commenting upon the specific merits (or lack thereof) of the “Occupy” movement this morning.

My point in bringing up this movement is not to diagnose political and economic realities; rather, it is to make a comment upon the perception and the experience of living under bad leadership.

There is a growing sense among people—including younger people—that those in positions of massive power and influence in the world, are acting primarily, if not exclusively, in **their own** interests rather than in the interests of the common good, in the interests of equality and fairness and justice, etc.

There is a growing sense—rightly or wrongly—that the ordinary person has little say in decisions that are made by important people wearing suits in high office towers, that affect our the quality of our lives in profound ways.

Our texts this morning make it clear that this is not exactly a new phenomenon.

The realities these texts describe are separated by roughly eight hundred years of history, but in both cases we are given a picture of what bad leadership looks like.

In the case of Micah, it is the “rulers of the house of Israel” or the “prophets who are described as “leading my people astray.”

The historical context when these words were written suggests that Israel's political and religious leaders were increasingly colluding with the Assyrian Empire, doing what they could to retain positions of privilege under their occupiers.

Despite all this, they assure people that they are doing the will of and speaking on behalf of God!

In the reading from Matthew, it is the “scribes and Pharisees” that are on the receiving end of some harsh words from Jesus.

Despite, “sitting in Moses’ seat”—a reference to their position of spiritual and political leadership over Israel—they are hypocrites, who love attention and respect and honour, who love to be seen as pious and devout, but who pile heavy burdens upon the people entrusted to their care.

In the cases of both the prophets in Micah’s day and the scribes and Pharisees in Jesus’ day, those charged with leading God’s people were leading for *their own sake*, for the sake of their own institutions and rituals, for the sake of personal power and privilege, rather than for the sake of those in their care.

I think most of us can think of examples of the reality described by these two texts.

There is no shortage of leaders in the church, leaders of corporations, politicians, or anyone else in positions of influence and authority, who have behaved in exactly the ways described in these two passages.

We are all too familiar with those who abuse their authority, who seek only the enhancement of their own reputation and honour, who think little of those “beneath” them, who tell people what they want to hear in order to preserve their status and control, etc, etc.

But I think we would miss the point of this passage if we were to look at them simply as examples of “how not to be a leader.”

Especially in the text from Matthew, we see that Jesus isn’t talking to a gathering of leaders—he’s not addressing a conference full of important people looking to recalibrate their leadership skills—but *ordinary people* like you and me.

The first verse makes this clear. He is talking to the crowds and to his disciples.

He is saying, in a sense, “you are all very well acquainted with how people above you act. You know how frustrating it is, you know how angry it makes you, you know how little it contributes to social peace and mutual respect, you see how

unjustly and unfairly people are treated by those who are supposed to look out for them.”

SOOO... So what? What does Jesus say?

Go “occupy Jerusalem?” Stage a protest? Fight the power? Start an online campaign to mobilize resistance and solidarity?

No.

There are other places in the gospels where Jesus **does** confront the powers—for example, when he overturns the tables of the moneychangers in the temple in Jerusalem just a few chapters earlier in Matthew (Mat. 21:12-17).

But not here.

What he says *here*, in the face of corrupt leadership, is this: **make sure you act differently**.

Make sure that the way that **you** behave gives evidence of a different way, an upside-down way, the illogical and irrational way of the gospel, where the first are last and the last are first, where the path to greatness goes through humility.

Make sure that **you** live according to the alternative reality that I am bringing about—a reality where “greatness” is defined differently than what you see around you (even from those who ought to know better!).

Make sure that **you** learn that the way to true power is in giving yourself away in service to others.

In Matthew 23:11, Jesus says “the greatest among you will be your **servant**.”

The Greek work translated “servant” is *diakonos*, from which we get the English word “deacon.” It means, literally, “one who renders service to another.”

This is how “greatness” is defined in the kingdom of God. Rendering service to someone else.

Not using them to reinforce our own position, not manipulating them, not burdening them with impossible religious demands.

Serving them.

In the kingdom of God, greatness = service.

On one level, our texts this morning are about us, and about how we are to live as followers of Jesus.

But the truth about **us** is *always* closely related to and dependent upon the truth about **God**.

What is crucially important for us to recognize here is that Jesus *lived out* everything that he taught to the crowds and disciples.

Jesus did not simply diagnose the problem of bad leadership; he embodied and enacted the cure. And in so doing, he gave human beings a new picture of what God is like.

We see this clearly just a few chapters earlier in Matthew 20:25-28:

²⁵ Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ²⁶ Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— ²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Our call to servanthood does not come from an autocratic, detached authority-God, but from the God who gave and continues to give himself away for the sake of the world he loves.

Few people have understood or expressed this better than theologian/pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who spent considerable energy resisting Adolf Hitler’s reign in wartime Germany.

Here is some of what he wrote from a prison cell in Tegel that he would only emerge from in order to be transported to his execution, mere months before the end of World War 2 (from *Letters and Papers from Prison*):

Who is God? Not in the first place an abstract belief in God, in his omnipotence etc. That is not a genuine experience of God, but a partial extension of the world. [It is an] encounter with Jesus Christ....

His ‘being there for others,’ maintained till death, that is the ground of his omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence. Faith is participation in this being of Jesus (incarnation, cross, and resurrection).

Our relation to God is not a ‘religious’ relationship to the highest, most powerful, and best Being imaginable—that is not authentic transcendence—but our relation to God is a new life in ‘existence for others,’ through participation in the being of Jesus.

The transcendental is not infinite and unattainable tasks, but the neighbour who is within reach in any given situation....

In other words, we don't take all of our conceptions of what God must be like—transcendentally powerful, knowledgeable, and good, sovereign, autonomous, etc—and apply them to Jesus; rather, we look at Jesus, and say: “this is what God is like.”

The order is crucially important.

Last weekend, a few of us from this church attended a concert in Medicine Hat by Welsh singer-songwriter Martyn Joseph. I had never heard of Martyn Joseph until Jonathan Schmidt recommended him to me, and have discovered his lyrics to be a profound source of wisdom and challenge as I've been listening over the last few weeks.

One of his songs is called “Strange Way” and is basically a poetic reflection upon the strange way that God acted and acts in and through Jesus Christ.

One of the lines from this song jumped out at me as I was preparing this sermon. In speaking of Jesus, he says this: “Strange way to merchandise your power.”

It is a strange way indeed.

It is strange that the God of the universe, the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15), the one in whom we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28), the one through whom all things in heaven and on earth were created (Col. 1:16), would “merchandise” his power through being a servant.

But he did. And he does.

And we are to imitate God.

“The greatest among you will be your servant.”

We are to “render service to each other.”

To those we do agree with *and* to those we don't agree with.

To those whose theology lines up nicely with ours, *and* to those whose does not.

To those who like the same kind of music we do, *and* to those who do not.

To those who treat us with charity and kindness, *and* to those who treat us thoughtlessly.

To those who honour us as dearly-loved children of God, *and* to those who seek to use us to bolster their own reputations and influence.

To those who are selfless and worthy of emulation, *and* to those who are selfish.

To those we like, *and* to those we don't like.

These are the people we are to render service to. This is what greatness looks like in the kingdom of God.

I'm happy to say that I see evidence of this at every turn here at Lethbridge Mennonite Church, whether at the Soup Kitchen, or at the Thrift Shop, or in Parent's Night Out (!), or in visiting the sick... The list goes on.

Let's keep it up!

I'm going to close with Paul's words from Philippians 2:5-11:

¹ Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, ² then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. ³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

⁵ In your relationships with one another, have the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had:

⁶ Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

⁷ rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

⁸ And being found in appearance as a human being, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

¹¹ and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

May God help us to seek this kind of greatness.

Amen.