

“Lord, Lord!”

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast
Olentangy Christian Reformed Church
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Matthew 7:21-29

Jesus concluded his Sermon on the Mount by telling his disciples how to identify false prophets – look at the fruit they produce! – and by warning them about the fate of the fruitless. And then this:

Not everyone who is saying, “Lord, Lord,” to me will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who is doing what my Father in heaven wants will. On that day, many will say to me, “Lord, Lord, didn’t we prophesy by your name? Didn’t we cast out demons by your name? Didn’t we perform many powerful signs by your name?” And then I will testify about them, “I never knew you. Get away from me, you workers of lawlessness.”

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice will be like a sensible man who built his house on rock. Heavy rain came down and waters rose and winds blew, and they fell upon that house. And it didn’t fall, because its foundation was rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice will be like a senseless man who built his house on sand. Heavy rain came down and waters rose and winds blew, and they beat against that house. And it fell. And its collapse was great.

When Jesus finished saying these things, the crowd were amazed at his teaching. Because he was teaching as if he had authority, not the way their scholars did.

Sermon

I don’t know what’s worse, falling or feeling like you’re going to fall. Last week I felt unsteady. I felt like the rug was being pulled out from under my feet. I felt like I was losing my footing, and my balance. I started wondering about myself and about my faith, wondering about my work and about what I find myself in the middle of. I hope you don’t mind if I tell you about it.

I suppose it started last week with BREAD (the organization, that is). On Tuesday a group of us from BREAD went for a walk. We walked from the BREAD office to the Columbus *Dispatch* building. We went there to meet with the editor Benjamin Marrison. The approach taken to Mr. Marrison was pushy, bordering on being disrespectful. Before we left the BREAD office, I questioned that approach. But my questions were dismissed. I was left feeling uneasy and a little bit angry. I wondered what I was mixed up in.

On Thursday the BREAD Clergy Caucus met. At the meeting my colleagues in ministry spoke passionately about the need to preach against all kinds of wrong and against all kinds of injustice. I began to wonder if I’ve been failing at my duty, out of fear perhaps. Failing to speak up and to speak out clearly – not just in hints – against, for example, the abomination of torture, no matter how it’s labeled by one government official or another (“enhanced interrogation methods” my foot!). Failing to speak up and to speak out against a war entered into and pursued without a hint of sorrow or penitence. Even if the war is just and necessary – and I have to tell you that I really doubt that – but even if the war is just and necessary, can’t we at least admit that our hands are not clean? That even when war is a necessary evil, it remains an evil – even when we wage it? I’ve been pretty quiet about all of that from the pulpit. And I’ve been wondering, since Thursday morning especially, if I have been false to my calling.

On Thursday evening I attended the rehearsal for tomorrow night's action meeting. I found myself wondering then, as I have more than once before, if there's room for the congregations of BREAD to repent, if there's room for us to come clean at our own meeting, if there's room – before we hold public officials' feet to the fire – to let those flames burn at our sin first.

Certainly we've not always wielded our collective power well, we fifty or so BREAD congregations. When we have power, just like anyone else we tend to forget humility. But our attitude should be that of Christ. He had all power, yet he humbled himself completely. We have not always wielded our collective power well.

And certainly we are party to and participants in the injustice of our community and of our state. Bad laws are passed by people we elect and then re-elect. Political parties and processes are corrupt, and we don't help by being by-standing critics who wouldn't dream of getting our hands dirty by getting involved. But we're already implicated. The blood flows from the touch-screen in the voting booth right onto our hands. We are the people. We are the community. The government, for good or ill, is us.

So why don't we repent, we BREAD congregations? I've been wondering, and wondering what I should do about it.

So I was losing my balance last week, and Matthew 7 didn't help, not at all. Jesus said that true and false prophets can be recognized by their fruit. "Look at the outcome of their words, look at their lives," Jesus said, "and you'll know who was true and who was false." That's fair enough. I can handle that. It's the next part that's disturbing.

Jesus says that what matters is "doing what my Father in heaven wants." Then he clarifies what the Father wants: "Hear these words of mine, and put them into practice." That, too, is fair enough. It's not too upsetting. But there's more.

Jesus says, "On that day, many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, didn't we prophesy by your name? Didn't we cast out demons by your name? Didn't we perform many powerful signs by your name?' And then I will testify about them, 'I never knew you. Get away from me, you workers of lawlessness.'" That is where it gets really scary. Many people were dead wrong. Dead wrong about themselves. Dead wrong about what they were doing. Dead wrong about the source of their power, about the source of their authority. Dead wrong about the one they thought they were worshiping and acknowledging: "Lord, Lord!"

If they were so wrong, so many of them, and so fooled about it, why should I think that I am not, that we are not, in the same boat? Not that we run around prophesying. Not that we run around exorcizing demons. Not that we run around working wonders. But we do have cherished understandings of faith. We do have cherished pictures of Jesus. We do have cherished expectations of God's grace, of God's mercy, of God's forgiveness. As the song says, we expect to "face our Judge and Maker unafraid."

But Jesus frightens me. Jesus is demanding. Jesus doesn't let me, doesn't let us, off the hook.

We love to worship. We love to sing, to hear Scripture, to give a few dollars, to take bread and wine. But are we, too, fooling ourselves? Are these sermons telling only part of the story – the part that comforts us, but not the part that challenges us, the part that confronts us? Does God hate the noise we make on Sunday morning? Is God deaf to our prayers because our hands are bloody, because we are immoral and unjust? Is God deaf to our prayers because we have taken the sharp edges off his commands, because living Gospel-shaped lives isn't our overriding passion, because we figure that the hard road of discipleship is optional really? Is God deaf to our prayers because we have let ourselves off the hook with promises of God's endless mercy, because that's what we've been taught, because that's what I've been teaching?

If we are fooling ourselves, we're in big trouble. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but in time the house will collapse. And we will be crushed beneath falling steel and wood and stone. That's what Jesus says. And it scares me. And I wonder if I'm in the biggest trouble of all, because I've been saying, "Lord, Lord!" And by the name of Jesus, I've been preaching half a Gospel maybe.

But I'm not sure. I'm wondering. Again and again I'm wondering. Wondering if I'm fooling myself. Wondering if I'm fooling you. I know I'm not fooling God. I know Jesus sees. I wonder how he sees me?

So what do we do? What do we do when the rug is pulled out from under us and we start to totter? What do we do when we're not sure of the ground we stand on, when we're not sure of our own feet? What do we do when we're afraid we've been fooling ourselves, that we're better at sounding faithful than at being faithful? What do we do when the blood is on our hands, and no matter how often we wash, it keeps coming back? What do we do when we are seduced by power? What do we do when we're afraid to speak the truth we know?

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Micah says we know what to do. "He has told you what is good and what the Lord requires of you." We know what to do. Listen to Jesus. Do what he says. We know what to do: to devote ourselves to justice, mercy, and faithfulness – the "weightier matters," as Jesus calls them. So, in particular and for the last time: Come to that action meeting tomorrow night. Do that for justice. Don't wait for BREAD to be perfect. It won't be, not as long as people like us are a part of it.

We know what to do. Listen to Jesus. Do what he says. Read the Sermon on the Mount. Fit your life to it. Sure, the Sermon on the Mount is an ideal. But the kingdom of God is an ideal. Because our God is perfect, and so is our king, Jesus.

That's about all for now. It's not enough, I know. And God help me if this sermon has been posing and posturing.

I'm still off balance, though. Too many things happened last week.

And I'm still afraid. Jesus is scary. "I never knew you!" What could be more devastating to hear?

Perhaps a prayer is in order. This prayer is from the 1948 Lambeth Conference of Anglican bishops. Let us pray:

Almighty God, give us grace not only to be hearers, but doers of your holy word, not only to admire, but to obey your doctrine, not only to profess, but to practice your religion, not only to love, but to live your gospel. So grant that what we learn of your glory we may receive into our hearts, and show forth in our lives: through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.