

Messages from the Ancestors

Micah 3:5-12, Matthew 23:1-12

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When my oldest son, Luke, was a child, one of his favorite responses to any kind of chastisement was “I didn’t know!” “Luke, your dirty clothes are all over the floor; I can’t wash them if they’re not in the hamper!” “I didn’t know!” Like that. So, of course, every time he said that, it was something he **did** know but simply had chosen not to do, heedless of consequences. Like kids will do!

Or maybe not just kids. Remember the story Jesus tells about the rich man who ignores the needs of the poor man, Lazarus, and then is chastised about it after he dies and ends up in hell? He wanted a messenger sent to his living relatives so they didn’t make the same mistake. The response was that “they have Moses and the prophets; let them listen to them!” The rich man said, effectively, “I didn’t know!” But he also had read Moses and the prophets when he was alive. He **did** know, but made choices based on other values, heedless of consequences.

Today the church celebrates All Saints Day. We don’t have a regular practice of capital “S” Saints in the United Church of Christ, but the purpose of the day has value for everyone. The idea is that God calls us to remember the lives of those who have been faithful in the past so that we can discern how to live our lives in the present. So that we can “know” a better way to go, or at least understand the consequences of not choosing the better way.

Jesus mentioned listening to the prophets, and we like to read the parts of the prophets which tell us that everything will be okay (i.e. Comfort, comfort my people). A good example is how we cherry pick from Micah. If anyone remembers any saying from the prophet Micah, it is from chapter 6, “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.” We tend to ignore the rest of the book, where Micah chastises those who lead the people away from following God, especially those religious people who should know better. Today’s readings from both Micah and Matthew are like that. As we face a continuing national reckoning, not just with the election, but with our values and character, I invite us to listen again to the words of very old saints, of Micah and Matthew, and not pretend we don’t know.

Micah describes those who claim to speak for God, but lead people in the wrong direction. They claim everything is okay because **they**, the rich prophets, have enough to eat, but then, like the religious leaders Jesus reprimands in Matthew’s story, they seek to make life difficult for those who have little. They, in Micah’s passionate words, “abhor justice, pervert equality, build up the city with blood and wrong, take bribes,

seek payment for making favorable predictions for the rich.” And yet claim to be righteous and to be interpreting the will of God to the nation.

Friends, we are reminded by Micah and Jesus to be very aware of what is really going on when we or other people operate like that in our society. It's even harder now than in the time of Micah and Jesus, because of social media and all kinds of technology, but the messages tend to be the same, and we, who should remember what we have heard from the prophets and Jesus and the saints, should be wise enough to hear it for what it is. Not to be fooled by the trappings of wealth or power. Not to let our own comforts shield us from the suffering that is endemic, actually epidemic, all around us today. Not to think that over 225,000 lives lost to the pandemic are acceptable losses. Not to think that over 500 children separated from their parents at our border without records kept to be able to reunite them with their families is acceptable policy. Not to think that having hundreds of people and families unsheltered in Hartford this winter is an acceptable way to treat the poor, the mentally ill, victims of abuse, those rejected by their families. Not to think that continued destruction and exploitation of our environment, the earth which God created, is acceptable.

Here's what we know, what the prophets and Jesus and all the saints-who-from-their-labors-rest tell us: Love God with all your heart, your mind and your strength. Let me remind us again of that one: Love God with ALL your heart, your mind, and your strength. Love your neighbors as yourselves. And when Jesus was asked to define “neighbor,” he told the story of a person helping their enemy who was injured. In other words, is there anyone who *isn't* your neighbor?

When we make choices not based in loving God and loving other people, we make them *knowing* they will hinder the Beloved Community, the kingdom of God, and *knowing* there will be consequences, either short term or long term. When we follow religious or secular leaders who promote choices not based in love, same thing applies.

Beloved in these times, it is so important to hold on to our ethic of love of God and love of neighbor, so that it informs everything we do. Someday, I believe our children's children will come together for All Saints Day. May they see in how we acted in this fragile and fraught time a way to follow in whatever comes in theirs. Amen.