

Liturgical Day: The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

Date: October 22, 2006

Sermon Title: Monthly Time with God's World

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

If you've been following the news, you'll be aware that something called the "Gospel of Prosperity" has received an awful lot of press lately. Simply put, those who ascribe to this school of thought think that God wants Christians to prosper – and that support of one's local congregation, and trust in God's goodness will lead to material and financial wealth for those who believe.

*Time* magazine had a front cover feature on Joel Osteen, Pastor of Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas. A couple weeks ago, the local Sunday morning paper featured Bishop Dennis Leonard of the Heritage Christian Center here in Denver. Both of these church leaders are exceptionally wealthy, they believe that God wants them to be wealthy, and they teach their followers that wealth is a sign of God's pleasure. This interpretation of the Christian life is receiving a huge following these days – each of these men lead churches that number in the many of thousands.

This is not a new phenomenon, though. In the 1990s, televangelists like Jimmy Swaggart or Jim Bakker or Oral Roberts were espousing a similar belief. Before them, Norman Vincent Peale and Robert Schuler were laying the groundwork for this thinking. Based on a few obscure texts, an entire system of belief has grown up around the hope that God rewards the faithful with wealth and comfort.

There is a lot of talk these days, in the media and in Christian communities, about this "Gospel of Prosperity." Google "prosperity & gospel" and you'll find dozens of sites.

It is a compelling belief, of course. Who wouldn't want to believe that we are the ones who have it right, and God is ready to reward us for our brilliance? And it fits so well with the cultural of our country – and the belief that those who apply themselves and work hard will be able to succeed at anything. I'd be willing to predict that as long as our society looks to wealth, fame, and power as markers of success, there will be those who imagine that success in the Kingdom of God can be measured by the same metrics.

The problem is: this way of thinking couldn't be farther from Biblical faith. We see that clearly in today's lessons. The prophet Micah lived in Isaiah's time – a time when Judah and Israel were relatively prosperous nations. The problem in Micah's time, though, was that the leaders of God's people had become focused on their own well-being: their palaces, their attendants, their armies, and their ceremonial role whenever God's people gathered. Micah knew better, though. He knew that to be faithful to God meant something entirely different. And so he challenged the leaders of his day, demanding that they turn from their self-centered ways, and again embrace God's call to be a people whose life together is marked by justice and righteousness. In what are perhaps his most famous words, Micah taught that God wasn't interested in their hollow religious ceremonies, but wanted them: "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God." [Micah 6:8b]

In his teaching with the disciples and others who followed him, Jesus delivered a similar message – one that is very evident in today's lesson. Jesus had just finished telling his disciples about what would happen to him in Jerusalem. He would be betrayed, and condemned, and mocked, and flogged and killed – and all of this he would willingly endure in order to welcome people into a new relationship with God. No sooner had he finished telling them that his life and ministry was all about what he would give to be a blessing in the lives of others, did James and John, two of his

FIRST LESSON

**MICAH 6:1-8**

GOSPEL LESSON

**ST. MARK 10:35-45**

PRAYER OF THE DAY

**ALMIGHTY AND MOST MERCIFUL GOD, WE CALL TO MIND BEFORE YOU ALL THOSE WHOM IT WOULD BE EASY TO FORGET: THE HOMELESS, THE DESTITUTE, THE SICK, THE AGED, AND ALL WHO HAVE NONE TO CARE FOR THEM. HELP US TO HEAL THOSE WHO ARE BROKEN IN BODY OR SPIRIT, AND TO TURN THEIR SORROW INTO JOY. GRANT THIS, FATHER, FOR THE LOVE OF YOUR SON, WHO FOR OUR SAKE BECAME POOR, JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD. AMEN.**

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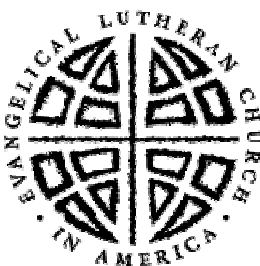
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Living in God's amazing grace

disciples, approach him and ask him for special favors when he entered into the glory of his kingdom. Jesus was teaching about a sacrificial life. James and John were wondering what they would get out of it. Jesus was teaching about the lengths he was willing to go, in order to make a difference for other. James and John were imagining themselves in purple robes, seated on thrones to the right and left of King Jesus.

Seventh century B.C. Kings soaking up the good life. First century disciples longing for glory. Twentieth century preachers touting the benefits of positive thinking. Twenty-first century church leaders claiming that God wants believers to live in unprecedented luxury. Proponents of today's "Prosperity Gospel" stand in a long line of people who have misunderstood what it means to be in relationship with God, and who have never figured out what Jesus was all about.

I say that, mindful that whenever I point my finger at someone else, there are at least three fingers pointing back at me. You and I live with a level of comfort that our ancestors could never have imagined. We too are in grave danger of being seduced into thinking that our own well-being is what it's all about. We too need the words of Micah and the words of Jesus to remind us who God is.

God is the one who loves us enough to die for us. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we are put right with God, and assured of God's eternal love for us. Then, graced by this gift, we are invited to show our gratitude by living lives that are built around what matters most to God. That's what our "Five Habits of Discipleship" are all about. They are five characteristics of a life that is lived in response to God's grace and love. They are five characteristics of our relationship with God.

The third of those five is spending time each month with God's world. Now there are some practical reasons to serve those in need, in the communities that surround us. Chief among them is that as we come to know the needs of our neighbors, and as we discipline ourselves to give from what we have to care for them, this involvement helps to limit our own self-indulgent behavior. We are reminded that the whole world doesn't revolve around us, and that the resources entrusted to us are not just for our own well-being. To the extent that we have been blessed with wealth and energy and enthusiasm and hope, we are to share that with those who are less fortunate. To do so makes this a better world, and everybody benefits.

But an even greater reason to be committed to making a difference in the community is this: That is what it means to live with Christ at the center of life. Inclination towards serving the community is natural for anyone who is in Christ. Those of us who follow a Lord who was willing to die for the world eventually come to see that as we give of ourselves to the world, we come closest to experiencing his presence in our lives. And so we embrace a hunger for humility and generosity. We help at a food bank or a shelter. We support work that others are doing to combat hunger and homelessness. We advocate in the political systems for those who are most vulnerable in our society. We do whatever we can to be aware of the physical, emotional and spiritual needs that surround us in this world, and use our gifts, as best we are able, to address them.

It is easy to come up with dozens of reasons why it is inconvenient to reach out beyond ourselves and make a difference in our communities. God's people have been doing that since Micah railed at them, since the disciples jockeyed for position next to Jesus, and on until today. This morning, both Micah and Jesus call us to abandon those excuses, and commit ourselves to making a difference in the world. Commit ourselves to being as gracious with the world as God has been with us.

Let's take a few minutes to look at page nine in our *Habits of the Heart* booklet, and consider how we will give of ourselves to the communities that surround us in the coming year.

*[provide time to look at the booklet, and answer some of the questions on page 9]*

Thank you for doing that – for taking the first step in deepening your commitment to live lives of service.

Let me leave you with a question this morning – one that you'll find on page 9 of your "Habits of the Heart" booklet:

**QUESTION OF THE DAY:**

What gifts has God given us, that we could use in serving others?

Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (October 22, 2006)

## Lesson:

Hear what the LORD says:

Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice.

<sup>2</sup> Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the LORD, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the LORD has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel.

<sup>3</sup> "O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me!

<sup>4</sup> For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.

<sup>5</sup> O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised, what Balaam son of Beor answered him,

and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the LORD."

<sup>6</sup> "With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high?

Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?

<sup>7</sup> Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil?

Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"

<sup>8</sup> He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? <sup>i</sup>

## Gospel (English Text):

<sup>35</sup> James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." <sup>36</sup> And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" <sup>37</sup> And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." <sup>38</sup> But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" <sup>39</sup> They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; <sup>40</sup> but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

<sup>41</sup> When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. <sup>42</sup> So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. <sup>43</sup> But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, <sup>44</sup> and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. <sup>45</sup> For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." <sup>ii</sup>

## Gospel (Greek Text):

<sup>35</sup> Καὶ προσπορεύονται αὐτῷ Ἰάκωβος καὶ Ἰωάννης οἱ υἱοὶ Ζεβεδαίου λέγοντες αὐτῷ διδάσκαλε, θέλομεν ἵνα ὁ ἐὰν αἰτήσωμεν σε ποιήσης ἡμῖν. <sup>36</sup> ὁ δὲ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς· τί θέλετε [με] ποιήσω ὑμῖν; <sup>37</sup> οἱ δὲ εἶπαν αὐτῷ· δὸς ἡμῖν ἵνα εἷς σου ἐκ δεξιῶν καὶ εἷς ἐξ ἀριστερῶν καθίσωμεν ἐν τῇ δόξῃ σου. <sup>38</sup> ὁ δὲ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν αὐτοῖς· οὐκ οἶδατε τί αἰτεῖσθε. δύνασθε πιεῖν τὸ ποτήριον ὃ ἐγὼ πίνω ἢ τὸ βάπτισμα ὃ ἐγὼ βαπτίζομαι βαπτισθῆναι; <sup>39</sup> οἱ δὲ εἶπαν αὐτῷ· δυνάμεθα. ὁ δὲ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν αὐτοῖς· τὸ ποτήριον ὃ ἐγὼ πίνω πίεσθε καὶ τὸ βάπτισμα ὃ ἐγὼ βαπτίζομαι βαπτισθήσεσθε, <sup>40</sup> τὸ δὲ καθῆσθαι ἐκ δεξιῶν μου ἢ ἐξ ἐυωνύμων οὐκ ἔστιν ἐμὸν δοῦναι, ἀλλ' οἷς ἠτοίμασται. <sup>41</sup> Καὶ ἀκούσαντες οἱ δέκα ἤρξαντο ἀγανακτεῖν περὶ Ἰακώβου καὶ Ἰωάννου. <sup>42</sup> καὶ προσκαλεσάμενος αὐτοὺς ὁ Ἰησοῦς λέγει αὐτοῖς· οἶδατε ὅτι οἱ δοκούντες ἄρχειν τῶν ἐθνῶν κατακυριεύουσιν αὐτῶν καὶ οἱ μεγάλοι αὐτῶν κατεξουσιάζουσιν αὐτῶν. <sup>43</sup> οὐχ οὕτως δὲ ἔστιν ἐν ὑμῖν, ἀλλ' ὡς ἂν θέλη μέγας γενέσθαι ἐν ὑμῖν ἔσται ὑμῶν διάκονος, <sup>44</sup> καὶ ὡς ἂν θέλη ἐν ὑμῖν εἶναι πρῶτος ἔσται πάντων δούλος. <sup>45</sup> καὶ γὰρ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου οὐκ ἦλθεν διακονηθῆναι ἀλλὰ διακονῆσαι καὶ δοῦναι τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ λύτρον ἀντὶ πολλῶν. <sup>iii</sup>

## October 22: Monthly Time with God's World

Micah 6:1-8

A Christian will have a strong future, only if he or she can find a purpose outside of himself or herself.

Many of us grew up in settings where faith was not discussed openly. In the modest, Midwest, small-town culture where some of us grew up, religion was a private matter (one of those two "avoid-at-all-costs" conversation topics). Very few people talked about their faith, and those who did were viewed with no small amount of concern. Yet even a cursory reading of Scripture discounts that notion. Jesus is very clear that the life of his followers is to be a life of witness. What's more, that witness is to be offered with more than words: our actions are to serve as a "light to the world" of the faith that is within us. In the great judgment parable of Matthew 25, Jesus teaches that living the life to which he calls believers means:

- Giving food to the hungry and drink to the thirsty.
- Welcoming the stranger.
- Clothing to the naked.
- Visiting the sick and imprisoned.

The Christian becomes involved in loving service to the community, believing that in serving the needy ones among us, we are serving Jesus himself. It is one concrete way for us to show our gratitude to God. However, service to our brothers and sisters in need goes beyond thanking God. It also helps to shape us into the people God wants us to be. We live in a world that is driven by consumerism. We are barraged on a daily basis with messages seeking to convince us that the quality of our life is directly proportional to what we are able to do for ourselves. "Purchase this commodity. Take this vacation. Support this politician. Participate in this experience. Live in this community." We are immersed in political, economic, and social systems that are sharply focused on what the individual has to gain from it all.

This message runs directly counter to the message of Scripture. Jesus teaches and models that the best life – the life that God wants for us – is marked by the desire to give of ourselves to our brothers and sisters in need. True life is not found in collecting possessions and experiences. True life is found in sacrificing ourselves, so others might be blessed. As Martin Luther often said: "The forgiveness we receive from Christ frees us to live as servants of others."

A disciple of Jesus Christ is **one who understands that servanthood is a central component of the faithful life**. One cannot be a disciple of Jesus without seeking to love and serve others as he did. At Saint Peter, we promote a minimum goal of one act of community service each month. Some of us help at a food distribution center. Others work with disadvantaged children. Others reach out to abused women. Others support work done by Lutheran Family Services, or Rainbow Trail Lutheran Camp, or Selian Lutheran hospital – or one of the many other Christian organizations seeking to serve people in need.

What does the habit of regular involvement in community service look like in a believer's life? Those who have grown in this area find it helpful to become involved in at least one community service activity each month. Various service organizations in the Denver area seek to assist people in finding experiences that are a good match for them. Call the church office for a listing of organizations and events that might help you and/or your household become regularly involved in acts of community service. As we do so, we find ourselves joining with Christ and reaching out to "the least of these, my brothers and sisters."

1. What acts of service do I perform within the church?
2. What acts of service do I perform outside the church?
3. What would I need to change in my life for service to play a larger role?
4. What gifts has God given me, that I could use in serving others?

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<sup>i</sup> Micah 6:108, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

<sup>ii</sup> St. Mark 10:35-45, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

<sup>iii</sup> St. Mark 10:35-45, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart). To display the Greek text correctly, choose Palatino Linotype font.