

Knowing God and Knowing Ourselves

Micah 3: 5-12; Romans 5: 6-11; Matthew 23: 1-12

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Howard Thurman, great African-American preacher, scholar, and mystic and who was dean of the chapel at Boston University until the mid-60's when he retired, remembers being caught in a storm and getting lost when he was a boy. He was out gathering berries in the woods and as he filled his bucket with berries and then paused and ate berries and hurried along to gather more berries, he didn't realize that he was making his way deeper and deeper into the forest. He also didn't notice the gathering summer thunderstorm on the horizon. Deep in the woods, it grew dark and all of a sudden the thunder hit. Looking up he realized that he was lost and he began to run in panic. Suddenly, a bit of family wisdom came to him: when you're lost, stop and be still, then look around and listen. He stood still, watching the lightning strikes illuminating the landscape and the forest. Looking left and then right, backward and forward, he at last saw something familiar. With each new lightning strike, he walked a few paces closer to his destination until he found his way home, guided by the storm that had frightened him (from Bruce Epperly, "Living by the Word," *Christian Century*, Oct. 18, 2011).

When we're lost in the darkness, our only hope is to stop for a moment and look for the light.

The spiritual director and psychologist Gerald May said that the spiritual life is like finding your way through the wilderness and involves pausing, noticing,

opening, stretching, and yielding. But the first thing needed is the recognition that we're lost. Taking a long look at where we are and where our behaviors and values have led us, is an essential step in living the Christian life.

Jesus in our lesson from Matthew and the prophet Micah in our Old Testament reading are both critical of the religious leaders of their day because of the religious leaders astounding lack of self-awareness and God awareness (Epperly). They're lost in the darkness and have no idea that they're lost.

Micah says that the false prophets and false prophets are content with their own affluence and assume that everyone else is doing fine, too. The churches/temples of Micah's day were full, the nation's elite were on the front row every Sabbath and the preachers thought that God is pleased. Meanwhile, the preachers are blind to the homeless, the impoverished, the unemployed, and the dispossessed.

Micah says that God will withhold wisdom and insight from the preachers who fail to see the pain that the affluent lifestyles have caused others. In other words, they will be in darkness. Micah's contemporary, Amos said that the injustice by the wealthy and powerful will cause a famine of the Word of God. It's not that the false preachers quit preaching the Bible; it's that it is no longer a Word from God when the preaching and living is disconnected from the poor and hurting. Amos says that God does not even show up for worship among such preachers and affluent when there is injustice toward poor people.

That's a pretty strong word but it's not my word. It's the Bible. Read it yourself. Go back and read Micah. Read Amos.

Micah says that the religious leaders, the false preachers are lost in darkness and don't even know it.

Jesus in Matthew 23 also has strong words for the religious leaders in the Temple. First, they put heavy burdens on the shoulders of others but they are unwilling to help the ones they burden. Second, they love to do their deeds in a way that they will be seen by others. They fail to see that even if what they do is right, if it is done to be seen it becomes easily perverted. Doing right for the wrong reasons can make what you do wrong. And third, Jesus condemns the religious leaders for seeking status and prestige. They want to be treated as important. Part of what happens, of course, is that such a life is self-destructive and leads to self-deception (see Stanley Hauerwas, *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible: Matthew*, p. 196). Like Micah, these religious leaders are in darkness and have no idea they're in darkness.

Jesus says to his disciples, "Don't be like those guys. Don't go around calling each other teacher or rabbi because the truth is, you are to be students, always learning and growing in God, never thinking that you've learned enough. Don't go around calling anyone else "father" for you have only one Father in Heaven. Those guys use father as a term of power over others; don't do that."

Jesus' primary criticism of the religious leaders is that they don't practice what they preach. They're hypocrites.

These passages of Scripture keep preachers awake at night. They are the reasons after thirty-two years of being a pastor, twenty-two of them here, that I can't sleep on Sat. night and I'm so nervous every Sunday morning. What I'm about is serious and ultimate business and I know better than anyone else how far I fall short.

It's easy for religious types to get into trouble; for our faith to become false. Studies show that the two most predominant ways we clergy get into trouble is

when we're either depressed or when we get into power. Loneliness and isolation seem to lend themselves to clergy trouble, too. For me, the power issue is resolved by being the pastor of a small church in East Texas. No power here. No delusions of grandeur.

A few weeks ago when I was delivering the Hoover Lectures at the Baptist Theological Seminary of Richmond, I knew I was going to challenge some powerful Baptists folks on the east coast. I told Jane, "What's the worst they can do to me? Send me to a small church in East Texas?"

Clergy get into trouble by going through the motions. It's hard to worship on Sunday morning, for example. Instead of being with God and God's people, I'm up here glancing at my watch, worrying over whether or not you're glancing at your watch, worrying what you think of the hymns, and how I'm going to say this or that. But over time when I do that, I've quit worshiping God and I've grown distant from God. In other words, I'm getting myself lost and I don't even know it.

Amos said that one of the things the people did in worship that got them into trouble is that while they were to worship God, their minds were on what they had to do next, how they were going to make money on Monday, and what their jobs demanded of them when worship was over.

We all get into trouble by going through the motions. We become self-righteous and begin to think we know more or we know best. We become hypocrites without realizing it; we have gotten ourselves lost and we don't even know it.

The prophets like Micah and Amos, and Jesus here in Matthew say that a primary reason we're lost and don't know it is that we've insulated ourselves from needing God and we've removed ourselves from others who know they need God.

The criticism was that the religious leaders lived among and only hung out with affluent and powerful people who thought everything was fine, that people were poor because they were lazy under-achievers, and that everyone was on their own and did not owe God or anyone else a thing. That's a sure sign, say the prophets and Jesus, of being lost.

If the only people we're with is at the country club or in front of the television then we had better beware. We are lost and we don't even know it.

Jesus tells the disciples – us – that we're called to be servants and that servant-hood is connected to humility. Humility means that we know we need God. Humility is the acknowledgement that without God we're lost.

Anyone of us who have been in hospital rooms or in cancer ward waiting rooms know this kind of humility. Hang around the jails and you know what we're talking about. Go to the nursing homes, the unemployment lines, and the food pantries in town, and we'll be humbled. In humility there is an openness to God that is not there in hypocrisy and self-righteousness.

Which brings us to our Scripture from Romans – the Apostle Paul says, “But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us” (Romans 5: 8). Before that he says, “Christ died for the ungodly” (5: 6).

Our humility is rooted in the sense that we are all ungodly sinners who have messed up in life and left to our own devices we will mess it up even more – or back to our original analogy: we are lost and on our own we will only go deeper and deeper into darkness.

You know the quote, “There but for the grace of God go I.” Well, the original quote is attributed to a sixteenth century Englishman named John

Bradford, who, when watching some malefactors being taken for execution, did not say, “They are getting what they deserve,” but rather, “There but for the grace of God goes John Bradford.”

The Christian life is rooted in the grace of God. Only by God’s good gift of grace are we given the light to guide us out of the dark woods of our lostness. To use Paul’s language, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God” (Ephesians 2: 8).

Two profound convictions save us from our self-righteousness and hypocrisy: (1) we’re all sinners, and (2) the grace of God saves us.

My hero and mentor, Will Campbell has wrapped his entire ministry around these two convictions. We’re all sinners and that includes both individuals and corporate systems, and everyone from the highest to the lowest. But God’s grace is for all. Therefore, in humility and with gratitude to God, we are about the work of grace in this world. For Will this has meant the work of reconciliation between black and white, gay and straight, among the poorest of the poor as well as the high and mighty, and he has worked tirelessly against capital punishment (“There but for the grace of God goes Will Campbell.”). In all his efforts, his sense of human sin and the expansiveness of God’s grace has kept him from any kind of hypocrisy and self-righteousness, and kept him from taking sides that some people are morally superior others.

In his book *And Also With You* he tells of a day when Will was with Kenneth Dean, a white Episcopal minister in Mississippi and civil rights activist, and they were walking with Sam Bowers, the Grand Wizard of one of the most extreme wings of the Ku Klux Klan, into the increasingly dark forests and swamps of

Mississippi – “as remote a place as I had ever seen,” where “dark rituals [had] unleased the night” at “nocturnal, clandestine gatherings” of the Ku Klux Klan.

It was the greatest test of my tentative understanding of unconditional grace as overshadowing, overcoming, conquering humanity’s inherent sinfulness I had ever known. The scandal of the gospel I had heard preachers and theologians talk about in generalities all my life assumed an even outrageous posture. Is grace abounding here in this darkening arcane forest? Truly unconditional grace? Something as crazy as Golda Meir chasing Hitler around the pinnacles of heaven, and after a thousand years he stops and lets her pin a Star of David on his chest?... I felt a strange oneness with the two men with me. And an even more unfamiliar concord with those I knew had convened on this ground to plan missions of atrocity (p. 264-265).

This strange oneness; this concord between enemies, this reconciliation that saves us from hypocrisy and self-righteousness, that saves us from lostness is the unconditional grace of God in Christ’s death on the cross, “overshadowing, overcoming, conquering humanity’s inherent sinfulness.”

May it be so with us. Amen and amen.