

6 Pentecost 26 – Oct 30, 2011  
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One school day in 1960, when my brother Martin and I were seven years old, my uncle George showed up at the classroom door with the school principal and told us to come with him. His face – and that of the principal – was grim. We wondered out loud where we were going, and why in the middle of the day, and he said “Grandma’s” – and we did. We never returned to our school again, and we never returned to our home. Later, we were able to piece together what had happened. At the zenith of the latest parental argument our father had bodily ejected our mother from our house and locked her out. Half an hour later he threw out two suitcases: some of her clothes, and ours.

This was the pivot-point – not the beginning, which was years old by now – of our parents’ separation and divorce.

Divorce was almost unheard of in England in the 1960s. It took several years and much heartache. There were few financial protections for the non-wage earner (almost always women), and significant social stigma.

We lived in our widowed grandmother’s house - which ultimately became our mother’s – for the next decade. I look back on it now as a slow descent into genteel poverty: never any new clothes, never any new anything, as the family silver and antiques were sacrificed to pay the bills. There was little financial support, even though her predicament was not of her causing. Some said to her “get a job”, even though, as a home-maker, she had few marketable job skills.

I was always aware that we needed to keep quiet about why there was no husband and father around, always aware of the looks and the conversations that stopped when we came near – on top of financial and emotional hardship was piled the social stigma.

The hardest thing for my mother – a regular and faithful church-goer at our local Anglican church – was that she wasn’t allowed to be a member of the equivalent of Episcopal Church Women – called the “Mother’s Union” – because she was divorced. The gossips and the arrogant and the self-centered could all be members, but – through little fault of her own – she was excluded.

Religious disdain was added to the mix. It broke her spirit, and she died a sad woman.

I’m not asking you to feel sorry for her – or me – though I won’t stop you! I am saying that she is a metaphor for the way we can treat those whom we think less of in our culture. My mother was treated unjustly by her culture, her society, and her friends. And she was not alone – her experience mirrored many women in 1960s Britain. She joined the downtrodden and the dismissed.

Most of our readings today echo this story. The psalmist talks of the creation of a people out of the downtrodden and the lost, and yet, by the time we get to Micah – one of those remarkable 8<sup>th</sup> Century B.C. prophets – we’re hearing about the downtrodden and the dismissed again – and it’s the same people. Yet this time it’s their own leaders perpetrating the abuse. Micah knew all

about financial hardship, social stigma, and religious disdain. Here he rails against a religious institution that had little time and no financial support for the poor. Rather, the religious and cultural elites of Micah's time were not just disdainful of those not like them but saw them as objects to be exploited – in direct violation of the Torah's directive that the most important people in Jewish culture were the “orphan and the widow, and the stranger”, and that a compassionate heart toward them was one of their faith's central demands. Remember what we had last week? Micah's three Great Commandments: “Do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8)

Today's gospel passage is almost identical. We should set aside the names here – the Pharisees had no standing in Jesus' time as leaders. They only came to power after the destruction of the Temple – in Matthew's time, in fact, which explains why he names them for his readers as the representatives of power and domination and all that was wrong with the religious institution of the time.

So forget “Pharisee” and hear instead “religious leaders”, the ones who “sit on Moses' seat” Matthew reminds us.– the ones who, in a theocracy, held the political and social power, and especially, who controlled scriptural interpretation – just like in Micah's time.

Matthew and Micah agree: What those leaders did was to interpret the scriptures in ways that were unjust – literally perverting justice at the gate – an OT phrase describing the place in every village where the judges came to give their verdict early in the morning before the farmers went out into the fields.

It was always a double-whammy: religious disdain and rejection on top of the sufferings of poverty of the marginalized. Sounds like what happened to my mother, only worse.

The Prophets have always stood with the marginalized against those who hold the reins of power. **Religious faith at its very best is a faith that does exactly that – stand with the marginalized.** We can name those prophets: two show up in our readings: Micah and Jesus. But we could name plenty more: Amos and Isaiah and Gandhi, and Martin Luther King Jr. and so many more – all individuals who got under the skin of those in power for the sake of justice with deadly consequences.

**Religious faith that is not at its best does not stand with the marginalized.** The Anglicanism of my youth abandoned my mother, and many other women, to the legalistic brutality of a tradition that had forgotten its roots in the compassion of Jesus.

And Religious faith has abandoned many more individuals and groups of people who deserved religion's compassion – and Christianity is among the worst: the misogyny that saw hundreds of thousands of women burned as witches down the centuries; the homophobia that continues to engage in violence against gays and lesbians, the anti-Semitism that, in some quarters, still blames “the Jews” for the murder of Jesus as a justification for denying their place in the family of humanity; the anti-Arabism that sees all Arabs as 9-11 hijackers and as a consequence seeks to deny them that same place – and the list goes on.

And where do we stand – as people of religious faith – when it comes to movements of the marginalized asking for a place at the table, asking not for a piece of the pie but a different pie? What about the Occupy Movement? Whatever we think of them they're raising profound questions about economic disparity and financial exploitation. They, like the Tea Party, want us as a nation to have a great debate, a great conversation, about what really matters to us as a people.

Political institutions will distrust such movements – they always have. But where do we stand? Where do we stand in the face of the financial and social inequities within our nation that seem to make a mockery of the right to pursue life, liberty, and happiness”?

The thing is it's not just a political question of a threat to the constitution. It's a threat to our own integrity as people of faith who say we are committed to living in a particular way, which includes seeking and serving Christ in all persons, striving for justice and peace among all people, and respecting the dignity of every human being.

Some religious institutions in our ever-smaller world have answered the question of where they stand. St. Paul's cathedral, in London – my first cathedral – decided to take legal action against the peaceful group camped outside its doors. Why? Because it was losing \$60,000 a day. It literally made up reasons to justify the legal action. The Canon Chancellor, Giles Fraser said he had been happy for people to “exercise their right to protest peacefully” outside the cathedral and would resign should force be used to remove the protesters. He resigned when force was used.

I am not telling you where you should stand. I am telling you that you as individuals – and we as a community – need to engage this question with intention, because the issue of justice that is again raised is not going to go away and how we choose to respond to it – and every other issue of justice – will tell the tale of our faithfulness to the core values of our founder – Jesus – which include compassion, love, and justice.

We are human beings. Our response is going to be imperfect by that very fact. It's why we'll continue to need Interfaith Peace Vigils – and need them for as long as there are human beings – and as long as there is religion – on this planet.

But no matter how imperfect, a response is required of us, or it will become increasingly difficult to call ourselves Christians. Amen.