

#OccupyChurch

Robin E. Lostetter

First Presbyterian Church, Bordentown NJ

October 30, 2011, Reformation Sunday

Scripture: Micah 3:5-12, Matthew 23:1-12¹



Occupy Church Demands:

- The creation of a culture of peace rather than war.
- The value of people over profits.
- Equal rights for all people, not just the majority.
- The protection of the environment before the corporate bottom line.
- Healthcare as a civil right for all, not just for the wealthy
- The same quality of justice for the poor as for the rich.

Do as I tell you, not as I do!! How many times have we heard that as children? . . . And how many times have we blurted it out ourselves in frustration?

I remember driving home from church and listening to my parents discuss the worship and fellowship of the morning. And, just like any other teenager, I wasn't very tactful, and on innumerable occasions, I pointed out my parents' flaws. So, from my vantage point as an uncompromised and uncompromising idealist, I called them hypocritical.

Many today consider the church filled with hypocrites — nearly 75% of those who haven't entered a church in the past 6 months think it is "full of hypocrites". And even more of them consider Christianity to be more about organized religion than about loving God and people. In fact, in a survey by the Barna Group in 2007, 44% agreed with the statement that "Christians get on my nerves."²

Both of today's scriptures address hypocrisy in its various guises. Jesus talks about Pharisees who say one thing and do another, and who also make sure the spotlight is on them when they do do good things. Micah calls out the rulers, priests, and prophets of Israel, who tell the people what they want to hear, in order to maintain the income they receive from the people. All of these targets of derision misuse their authority.

And I'm sure you can think of contemporary figures who do so today . . . some are religious leaders, some are in the media, and some might even be found in government.

In fact, my sermon title is a take-off on the Twitter tag of "Occupy Wall Street". And unbeknownst to me, someone has actually created an "Occupy Church" list of demands:

- *The creation of a culture of peace rather than war.*
- *The value of people over profits.*
- *Equal rights for all people, not just the majority.*
- *The protection of the environment before the corporate bottom line.*
- *Healthcare as a civil right for all, not just for the wealthy.*
- *The same quality of justice for the poor as for the rich.*

In addition, the current displeasure of the 99% with those who govern them, may be seen in excerpts of something circulating the internet under the title of the "*Congressional Reform Act of 2011*". It includes these populist and egalitarian clauses:

- *Congress can purchase their own retirement plan, just as all Americans do.*
- *Congress will no longer vote themselves a pay raise. Congressional pay will rise by the lower of CPI or 3%.*

- *Congress loses their current health care system and participates in the same health care system as the American people.*
- *Congress must equally abide by all laws they impose on the American people.*³

And these slings and arrows are so tempting, so in keeping with the desire for better and more equal representation, . . . but . . .

But . . . unless I'm willing to state, as Micah did, that "as for me, I am filled with power, with the spirit of the LORD, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin . . . to the Senators and candidates for office . . . to religious leaders with whom I disagree . . .

Unless I can separate myself out as righteous, as Micah did – and even moreso, as Jesus did, with authority – then that finger pointing turns right around at me. Barbara Brown Taylor writes that "the only preachers who can really stand shoulder to shoulder with [Micah] are those who work for free. The rest of us will stand *under* the [judgement of the text . . . right along with everyone else, allowing Micah to] warn us about the dangers of leadership in an affluent society—especially one where religion and power are so often wed. Micah suggests that there is plenty wrong with making moral decisions based on the benefits we receive from them."⁴

There's a story "from the life of Christian preacher and civil-rights activist Clarence Jordan. Jordan made his profession of faith in 1922, as a boy of twelve, in a Baptist tent revival in Georgia. One of his most vivid memories, on that occasion, was the image of a man in the choir who was singing with evident joy and gusto, the hymn, 'Love Lifted Me.'

"The following night, Jordan was awakened by a terrifying sound. His family home overlooked a prison and from his bedroom window he could see right into the prison yard. There, below him, he could see a prison guard beating — torturing, really — an African-American prisoner. He couldn't take his eyes away from the dreadful scene. Then, to his amazement, he realized that the brutal prison guard was the very same man he had seen the night before, singing 'Love Lifted Me,' with an expression of pure joy upon his face."⁵

Although such a jolting encounter with such blatant hypocrisy might make another person abandon the church, it energized Jordan. "He would grow up to become committed to the radical nature of Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. He became a biblical scholar, translating the New Testament into the common language of the rural people of his part of Georgia, in the famous 'Cotton Patch' Gospels.

What Jesus says in Matthew about the Pharisees, could be said of many sincere teachers of the Law of Moses – and of the Gospel; therefore his challenge to them has a universal relevance to all who dare to teach. And we Presbyterians have reclaimed an older title for persons like me who occupy the pulpit . . . though I was ordained a Minister of Word and Sacrament, that order has been renamed "Teaching Elder." Both titles imply responsibility, but as I read and re-read the Matthew passage, the title "Teaching Elder" became quite a heavy burden. As Earl F. Palmer, of the National Presbyterian Church in Washington D.C. has observed, "It is almost impossible to defend ourselves against this charge if people have been able to watch our public lives and behavior."⁶

So my initial take on today's scripture passages, as perfectly applicable to many who sit in the seats of government, or who occupy media pulpits . . . well, I had to swallow that take and sit a bit with the

challenges myself.

But this is not to say we are unable to bring to bear Gospel values in the marketplace, in society, in school, and in church, and collectively — and with humility — call out those whose behavior does not match their words . . . or who, like the Pharisees, "tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; [while] they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them." . . . or who, like the prophets of Micah's time, "lead [the] people astray, who cry "Peace" when they have something to eat, but declare war against those who put nothing into their mouths."

And yet, I hearken back once again to Barbara Brown Taylor, who cuts us no slack. Part of the humbling of ourselves "may involve examining the ways in which we are embedded—both individually and collectively—in systems that reward us for our compliance. As long as we keep our confidentiality agreements at work, we can count on our annual bonuses. As long as our churches stay out of county politics, we can count on good relationships with our local representatives. . . . [again], Micah suggests that there is plenty wrong with making moral decisions based on the benefits we receive from them."⁷ When a zoning board decides to demolish low-income housing through eminent domain in order to build expensive condos and shops, as in Asbury Park, where our presbytery's only Hispanic congregation used to be located . . . what is the ripple effect? What about a zoning board that forbids a church from building a large common room, unless they promise not to open a soup kitchen, as happened in Point Pleasant Beach to the Baptist Church? "What about a religious school accepting money from a corporation trying to placate its environmental critics — what message does this send to students?"

John Donne said it for all time, "No Man Is An Island". We humans are connected in this earthly fabric before God. We have different gifts, different roles to play, but we are all equal in God's sight. And every decision you or I make affects others. You may not think of yourself as a leader, such as those Micah and Jesus pointed to, or as a corporation. But each one of us "with disposable income is an economic leader of sorts—benefiting some people and bypassing others with every dollar [we spend]. Micah may not have had his eye on such ordinary spenders [as you and I], but he did have . . . money in view." Barbara Brown Taylor hammers the point home, saying, Micah "had *our* money in view, which means that none of us may excuse ourselves from the company of those he judges."⁸

And Jesus' words apply as well. He was not simply berating the Temple leaders, but he was instructing his listeners in the true nature of discipleship. One of our dearest human sins is idolatry . . . placing something or someone ahead of God in our lives. The Pharisees did it; Micah's false prophets did it. It's so easy to confuse our interests with God's purposes. It's easy to point at the politicians who legitimate their positions which may be contrary to scripture through appealing to their faith or a selective scripture to do so. But we must also watch ourselves. St. Augustine noted, "Pride is a perverted imitation of God. For pride hates a fellowship of equality under God, and seeks to impose its own dominion on fellow men, in the place of God's rule."⁹

Remember Clarence Jordan — the Georgian preacher who wrote the "Cotton Patch" Gospels? Well, as an adult, he and his wife turned their back on the "tall-steeple" pulpits available to him, or the possibility of a seminary professorship. Instead, they made the decision to found Koinonia Farms, a racially inclusive Christian community near the place where he had first witnessed that brutal beating. Their commitment to a Christian community that modeled the Gospel values they held dear cost them their membership in their church. The church expelled the entire family from membership because of their commitment to racial

veness. Our decisions and our values may exact a cost. But those same decisions have ripple effects we cannot predict. A young businessman named Millard Fuller, inspired by what he had seen of the Christian life at Koinonia Farms, went on to found Habitat for Humanity.¹⁰

Let us pray.

Lord, may we always remember
that we do not practice our faith in private.
Always there are those who are looking on,
observing, drawing conclusions
not only as to the integrity of our commitment,
but as to the very worth of the gospel message.
Keep us ever faithful.
Give us the courage to stand up to injustice
and the hypocrisy that feeds it,
witnessing to the all-inclusive,
all-encompassing love of Christ,
who came to set us,
and all people, free. Amen.

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ENDNOTES

1. I used this scripture 7/31/11, but I preached on Job. The only reference to Mt 23 was:

“But ask the animals, and they will teach you.” As for humans, Jesus admonished about the scribes and Pharisees, “do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach.”

I daresay there are few animals, and nary a meerkat, who will not practice what they teach and pass on. If Martin Buber can see God, the eternal Thou, in the eyes of an animal, I'm willing to see a model for commitment and self-sacrifice in the Meerkats of the Kalahari Desert.

2. Carlos Wilton, *Lectionary Preaching Workbook, Series VIII, Cycle A*, CSS Publ, p. 354.

3. Occupy Wall Street cites these statistics: People in the top 1% of the nation's income bracket saw their income skyrocket by 275% between 1979 and 2007. Meanwhile, the income of people in the bottom 80% has dropped, a trend highlighted by the Occupy Wall Street movement and their “We are the 99%” slogan. from <http://news.yahoo.com/blogs/lookout/numbers-income-top-one-percent-skyrocketed-over-last-153005722.html>
“Congressional Reform Act of 2011”

1. No Tenure / No Pension. A Congressman collects a salary while in office and receives no pay when they are out of office.
2. Congress (past, present & future) participates in Social Security. All funds in the Congressional retirement fund move to the Social Security system immediately. All future funds flow into the Social Security system, and Congress participates with the American people. It may not be used for any other purpose.
3. Congress can purchase their own retirement plan, just as all Americans do.
4. Congress will no longer vote themselves a pay raise. Congressional pay will rise by the lower of CPI or 3%.
5. Congress loses their current health care system and participates in the same health care system as the American people.
6. Congress must equally abide by all laws they impose on the American people.
7. All contracts with past and present Congressmen are void effective 1/1/12. The American people did not make this contract with Congressmen. Congressmen made all these contracts for themselves. Serving in Congress is an honor, not a career. The Founding Fathers envisioned citizen legislators, so ours should serve their term(s), then go home and back to work. If each person contacts a minimum of twenty people then it will only take three days for most people (in the U.S.) to receive the message. Maybe it is time.

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4. Barbara Brown Taylor, "Homiletical Perspective on Micah 3:5-12", *Feasting on the Word, A-4*, p. 245.
 5. Wilton, p. 353, quoting a sermon by J. Bennett Guess on the *Protestant Hour*.
 6. Palmer, "Pastoral Perspective on Matthew 23:1-12", *Feasting*, p. 262.
 7. Brown, 245.
 8. *Op cit.*, 247.
 9. Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (NY: Penguin Books, 1984), 868-69, as quoted by Tim Beach-Verhey, "Theological Perspective on Matthew 23:1-12", *Feasting*, 262.
 10. The ending of the Jordan story and the concluding prayer are taken from Wilton, pp. 353-354.