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Psalm 107:1-7, 33-37

Matthew 23:1-12

## THE LEADERS WHO ARE NEEDED

There was an old *Peanuts* comic strip that had Charlie Brown's dog, Snoopy, on top of his doghouse with a flock of baby birds. The time had come for the baby birds to learn how to fly, and Snoopy was their teacher. Snoopy flapped his ears and walked to the end of the roof of the doghouse. He leaped into the air and continued to flap his ears. Unfortunately he landed right on his head. He got back up onto the roof and shared this lesson with the young birds: "Do as I say to do and not what I do." <sup>1</sup>

Our example to others doesn't fly when we say to others, particularly to little ones, "Do as I say to do and not what I do." When we want to fly another way using an airline to do so, we need some kind of ticket, and we have to decide whether we will be flying first class, business class, or coach. We have to ask ourselves whether the extra sitting and leg room, the better service with food and drink, the advantage of boarding and exiting the plane before others is worth the higher prices. Travel is one of the areas of life where we can see that we are not a classless society. Perhaps, it has always been that way here.

I read something that described travel in the Western part of our country during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Even when people were traveling by stagecoach, there were different classes based on how much one spent on a ticket. In contrast to airline travel today, the classes of tickets on the stagecoach did not have to do with the size of the seat or the kind of food that was served, but rather with what was expected of the ticket holder in case the stagecoach got into a difficult situation. There were occasional deep mud holes or steep inclines or other difficulties to be negotiated at one time or another along the way.

There were three types of tickets sold. The first class, which, of course, was the most expensive, entitled the ticket owner to remain in the stagecoach no matter

what conditions might be faced. When you got the most expensive ticket, what this meant is that you were exempt from having to put forth any kind of effort during the trip. A second-class ticket meant that if difficulty arose, you had to get out to lighten the coach, walking alongside it until the difficulty could be resolved. The cheapest ticket - the third-class one - called on the holder to take responsibility for difficulties. This meant they not only had to get out of the coach when there was a problem, but they also had to, alongside the driver, get down in the mud and do whatever had to be done so that the vehicle could either get unstuck or get up the hill. <sup>2</sup> You would not be surprised to know those who had this category of ticket held the least prestige.

This Tuesday is Election Day. We have the privilege, the right, and the responsibility to choose some of our political and judicial leaders. I encourage you participate in that process in an informed way. But I focus today, not so much on the qualities that are needed in our political leaders, but on what is needed in our Christian leaders, our church leaders, our congregational leaders. In our gospel reading, Jesus was quite harsh in his criticism of some scribes and Pharisees, who were among the Jewish leaders. His intent was to urge his followers not to imitate a remote and haughty leadership style. We as Christians need to be cautious not to read these words in the light of today's Jewish-Christian relations. When Jesus criticized some of the Jewish leaders, he did so as a Jew, speaking as a part of that faith community.

Jesus' concern was not with what the scribes and Pharisees were teaching as much as with their lack of application of their own teaching. He gave examples of this. He saw their understanding of Hebrew law as being a heavy weight thrust upon the shoulders of others. The procedures became so cumbersome that no human being, including the leadership, could possibly accomplish them. What Jesus called for was not nitpicking moral minutia, but great themes for direction and meaning for one's life.

A second concern Jesus mentioned had to do with appearance. Jesus describes those who in their religious practice wore broad phylacteries and long fringes. Many Jews wore phylacteries, small containers with verses of scripture on their arms or foreheads during prayer, or had tassels or fringes on their cloaks to

remind them of God's commandments. But the reminders toward faithfulness had evolved into bold fashion statements for some who were attempting to showboat their piety.

A third example Jesus used had to do with the practice of those officials who were pulling rank by insisting that others were to use titles of honor when referring to them. They had built an expectation that the best seats in whatever setting would be reserved for them. They were enjoying their prominence and prestige. They felt like they should be traveling first class. However, these qualities were not what made them great religious leaders in God's eyes, according to Jesus.

Last Tuesday was the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. In particular, the Presbyterian part of that movement, in part because of our gospel lesson today, moved away from the elevation of individual leaders for the church, choosing a team approach to leadership that sought greater simplicity and humility in expressions of faith. We live in a society that values appearance, status, wealth, position, individualism, materialism and consumerism.

But what Jesus calls upon us to value is counter-cultural when it comes to what is first class, second class, and third class in terms of behavior. The willingness to serve, doing so in a loving fashion, is the greatest of all the values in the Christian hierarchy of understanding. According to Jesus, the One who always practices what he preaches, the true first-class status is not one of exemption or privilege where we pay the most so we'll have to do the least. It is, rather, the eager willingness to do whatever a problem situation requires no matter how menial or seemingly disagreeable, so that we might continue our journey together, assuming of course that we have a God-given destination. This servant willingness represents the highest of all values. One is free to live in this way by the realization that our worth as human beings comes from an act of God and not from our own competitive achievements. Our worth is given to us as a gift, and realizing this in the depths of our being, is the great freeing reality.

Today is All Saints' Sunday. I am thankful for the witness of those whose actions and words consistently followed the lead of our Lord Jesus Christ. What is really

first class in the eyes of God is a person who is freed by grace to be a servant who enables all who are traveling together to move forward, whatever our mode of transportation. We already are totally and completely the beloved of God. Once that gracious truth takes root in the depths of our being, then each one of us, in whatever role we play in the life of this church, can begin to act out what is truly first class in God's eyes. All honor and glory goes not to any one of us, but to the One who inspires and directs our journey - our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> Found in an article at <http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/1804/practice-what-you-preach>

<sup>2</sup> From content shared by John Claypool found at:  
<http://www.30goodminutes.org/index.php/component/content/article/23-member-archives/716-john-claypool-program-3919>