Spirituality
Pencil Preaching





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“An evil and unfaithful generation seeks a sign, but no sign will be given it except the sign of Jonah the prophet" (Matt 12:39).

Micah 6:1-4, 6-8; Matt 12:38-42

Today's readings continue the theme that God sends prophets to us to call us to observe the commandments and to live the Covenant of justice and love. Micah was such a prophet in ancient Israel. He reminded the people that God did not ask for difficult things. There is no grand revival except this. “You have been told, O people, what is good, and what the LORD requires of you: Only to do the right and to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:6-8). Do this and you will live in peace and justice.

Early in his Gospel, Matthew (4:15) quotes Isaiah 9:1 describing the appearance of a great light for the gentiles in northern Galilee, people “who lived in darkness and in the shadow of death.” Jesus was that light appearing not just to the chosen people but also to Gentiles and foreigners. Seven chapters later, in today’s Gospel (Matt 12:38-42), Jesus reproaches the Jewish leaders for not responding to the Good News he had announced. They seek signs, but do not respond. He compares himself to Jonah, who won over the Ninevites with a half-hearted appeal to repent. Why can’t you repent? He tells of the queen of the South coming all the way to Jerusalem to

find the wisdom of Solomon. Don’t you see that an even greater wisdom is here?

What happens if we reject or ignore God’s invitation to “repent and hear the Good News”? Matthew follows his pattern of applying the words of the prophets to Jesus. As they preached conversion to ancient Judah and Israel but were rebuffed, the same thing happens to Jesus. The Gospel narrative has Jesus preach to deaf ears in Galilee, then travel south to Jerusalem to be rejected and crucified. Yet rather than end in defeat, the narrative holds a “messianic secret.” Jesus is revealed not as God’s conquering hero who saves the righteous and punishes sinners, but as a suffering servant who takes on the sins of the whole world and whose very rejection reveals the depth of God’s love for sinners.

Therefore, the Good News is not a predictable story of God offering a second chance to a sinful world and then saving those who respond, but an even deeper and more mysterious story of God’s inexhaustible mercy for unrepentant sinners. God’s love is never withdrawn. The Good Shepherd never abandons even a single lost sheep. The Father never gives up on the prodigal son or his angry brother.

In the end, salvation is always free, always available, always leaving a light on for the last sinner to come home, even at the 11th hour. This is essence of God, to be merciful, and God never ceases to be God. The only variable left is us, our freedom to say yes or no, to accept or reject God’s offer.

The basis for the church of mercy Pope Francis preaches is that we must be merciful because God is merciful. We can never know what happens in the heart of another person, whether some final grace is at work in their journey. Therefore, we can never give up on anyone or close the door on another to satisfy our own sense of justice.

As our world moves into a time of self-judgment and lamentation, the only way to break the growing mood of anxiety, blame and fear or the impulse to turn on one another, is to recover the God of Mercy in our midst. There is something scandalous about God’s persistent love for us in the face of our own failures. But in God there is always hope; God is always present to us in the trouble and suffering we have created for ourselves. The way forward is simply always more love, more hope, more mercy, “to do the right and to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God” Micah 6:4-8).

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