

## THE LEAST OF THESE...

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### Matthew, Chapter 25

Then the King will say to those at his right hand,  
'Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you ...  
For I was hungry and you gave me food,  
I was thirsty and you gave me drink,  
I was a stranger and you welcomed me,  
I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me,  
I was in prison and you came to me.'  
Then the righteous will answer, 'When did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink?  
And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you?  
And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?'  
And the King will answer them,  
'Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me.'

### Micah, Chapter 6

What does your God require of you,  
but to do justice,  
to love kindness  
and walk humbly with your God."

I love Jon Stewart and the Daily Show, the satirical nightly newscast on Comedy Central. If you do not watch it, I commend it to you. I love Stewart because, while I suspect that he is actually rather progressive, he is equally happy to skewer all politicians who happen to be making fools of themselves on any given day. He is an equal opportunity satirist.

Stewart doesn't like to make so much of what he does. When people praise him for doing the duty of the news media, he hands it right back. He says, "I'm a comedian. What does that say?" I don't think this is false humility; it is part of his message. He is indeed a comedian doing social commentary and satire of a most acute sort. And he would most decidedly object to what I am about to say: I think Jon Stewart is a prophet in our times. What *does* it say that our prophet comes in the form of a stand-up comic?

Except prophets have always come from unlikely places.

Prophecy is not fortune telling; it is truth telling. In the Jewish and Christian traditions, the job of a prophet is to speak truth to power. The usual job qualification is to be a nobody from no place, or at least an unlikely candidate for profound utterances. Stewart looks more like a prophet all the time.

Jim Wallis is a progressive evangelical Christian – no that is not an oxymoron – who has been a guest on the Daily Show. Wallis is raising a powerful and articulate voice about progressive faith in the public square. A voice saying that we cannot let the Religious Right hijack the moral ground. To be evangelical means to live a life in accordance with the teachings of the Bible. Wallis is not a fundamentalist – he does not take the Bible literally – but his life is guided by the moral imperative he finds in the teaching of Rabbi Jesus.

And, Wallis notes, there are more than 3000 verses in Christian scripture that deal with poverty. It is clear to him, therefore, that fighting poverty is a moral issue. Saving the environment – otherwise known as God's creation – is a moral issue.

Yet, Wallis says, we do not need a Religious Left to counter the Religious Right. Wallis says that the Religious Right is the

deliberate brainchild of the political right. Conservatives consciously offered a Faustian bargain to particular television preachers. They would be brought into the circle with the power elite, and they were seduced from the outset. They lost their own moral authority as soon as they accepted that power.

As people of faith, we cannot align ourselves with any particular political point of view. We are at our best when we are not ideologically predictable. We must be able to speak truth to power – no matter who is in power. We must ask first and always, what is right? And what works?

And we must be willing to lead with our faith. In Wallis' latest book, *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets it Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get it*, he discusses the Faustian bargain of the Religious Right. Yet he also chastises the left for being timid with their religious beliefs, or rejecting religion altogether.

Wallis tells us that while our faith is always personal it is never private. "Where would we be," he asks, "if Martin Luther King had kept his faith to himself?"

He goes on, "The truth is that most of the important movements for social change in America have been fueled by religion – progressive religion." He cites abolition, the labor movement, the civil rights movement and more. He speaks of Gandhi in India and Bishop Tutu in South Africa.

He insists that a public voice of faith can never be partisan. He writes: "The great practitioners of great social change, like Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi, understood something very important. They knew that you don't change a society by replacing one wet-fingered politician with another. You change society by *changing the wind*."

My friends, that is the work our faith calls us to. The work of prophecy in our time. The work of becoming wind-changers. Our faith can and should be our guiding light. Those who have come before us should be our inspiration. May what they dreamed be ours to do.

I have always looked back on the World War II era with great nostalgia. Now *there* was a time that moral choices were clear and unambiguous. Hitler and fascism were evil and had to be resisted. The sacrifices of that generation were noble and necessary. In retrospect, it is pretty clear that was so. Except it was by no means as clear to the people at the time. Europe tried to appease Hitler for years. An isolationist U.S. resisted getting into the war while France fell and the English valiantly fought the Battle of Britain. All moral issues have ambiguity when we are smack in the middle of them.

I take pride in my ability to see not just two, but multiple sides to an issue. It can be very helpful in many circumstances. Yet as with any strength, it can be a weakness. Seeing multiple sides can make it hard to choose one.

I once lived in a progressive household with three other adults and a child. My roommates, who were not just progressive but downright radical, had a poster over the fireplace with a quotation from Dante's *Inferno*. "The hottest places in hell are reserved for those, who in times of great moral crisis, sit on the fence." I felt accused every time I walked through the living room. I simply could never be as certain about what was right and what was wrong.

Hence my longing for a time when morality seemed so clear. I know that absolute certitude is impossible. Yet I am also telling you today, that if ever there were a time to quit sitting on the fence, it is now.

Wallis makes a passionate appeal to people of faith. Our unique role in countering repression calls us to prophesy—to name evil and call for reform. This is our sacred task—to be the political conscience of society.

There are two elements of prophecy: to cry out against injustice and, equally important, to cast a new vision before the people. We are not so good at the second part. We are very good at saying what we are against, but not so good at saying what we are for, what kind of world we'd like to build. We must show the way for personal and social transformation – for transforming lives and transforming the world is what we are about.

Wallis offers another Biblical saying you may have heard before, "Without a vision, the people perish." Yet he points to a different translation: "Without prophecy, the people cast off restraint."

Isn't that what's wrong today in our society? We have cast off restraint. We are fully absorbed by the getting and spending of money. We are enslaved by the very system we abhor. We are seduced by the bread and circuses of our time. So many of us have lives overfull with activities and material goods. And we live in a culture that tells us we have a right to all that we have, that what we have is under threat, and our work must be to protect our own interest.

What ever happened to the Common Good? Why is it that we no longer live out the imperative to care for one another? It is exactly what all religion calls us to. To compassion. To act for the common good. To make sacrifices for one another. Yet we live in a time when many, under the guise of a religion, choose to turn the other way.

I shudder whenever I hear the phrase "ownership society." When the president calls for privatizing Social Security, I wonder what on earth has happened to us.

My home church in Oakland, California once partnered with an African American church to work in a homeless shelter. A friend of mine noticed that his partner from the other church went about her work with great lightness of heart. He felt good to be doing this work, but it rather depressed him. He asked her how she stayed so positive. She replied, "Oh, I'm just doing my Matthew 25 work."

Now as a good Unitarian, my friend had to go home and look it up. He found the verses I read before our meditation this morning. "Whatsoever you do to the least of these, you do to me." The work among the downtrodden gave this woman great joy, for through it she knew she was connecting directly to the greatest holy source in her life. O young and fearless prophet of ancient Galilee, your call is still a summons to serve humanity.

Matthew 25 talks about those who will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, being judged by how they have treated the least among us. As any society should be judged. Our work is creating the transformation necessary to create the Kingdom of Heaven here on earth. I believe we are judged, here and now, by how we treat the least among us.

Wallis writes, "How a candidate deals with poverty is a religious issue, and the Bush Administration's failure to support working families should be named as a religious failure. Neglect of the environment is a religious issue. Fighting pre-emptive and unilateral wars based on false claims is a religious issue."

As we become prophets in our own time, we can learn much from the Hebrew prophets.

Amos, a shepherd, lowest of the low on the social pecking, confronted the leaders of a prosperous nation during an economic boom. Speaking sharp words in a smooth time, Amos deplored shallow piety, reliance on military might, and social injustice.

He said,

I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies,...  
The offerings of well-being of your fatted animals, I will not look upon them.  
Take away from me the noise of your songs;  
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

That is the sort of job prophets have. Speaking sharp words in smooth times. Not always a popular thing to do. The prophet Jesus of Nazareth made his keynote address in his hometown, as Luke recounts, by quoting an even more ancient prophet, and challenging his neighbors to redistribute their wealth to the poor. They ran him out of town. It is not easy to be a

prophet.

The Hebrew prophet Micah summed it up: "What does God require of you, but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God." Justice, kindness, humility. That is the long and short of it. But if you actually give people specific examples, that is when the trouble starts.

Because it just might require changing comfortable lives.

And these are times so critical that we must do something differently now. Times will never be more morally clear than they are now. Some talk about how America is on the road to fascism, comparing our times to Weimar Germany. While I still think that is an overstatement because there are important distinctions between that time and ours, I no longer feel like quibbling. We live in a time of great peril. We must respond. We must respond by changing our own lives. We must respond by giving our faith a voice in the public square. We must do our Matthew 25 work.

First, a caution: Don't concentrate on what you are against and what you fear. We must resist the forces that make us afraid and breed despair. We must stand up for what we believe to be right and true. Try very hard not to engage in what I call "ain't-it-awful" discussions. They only drag us down and disempower us. Talk positively about what is good and right and what we must do to move forward and to resist.

As Jim Wallis says: Protest is good. Alternatives are better.

How shall you change your life? The prophet Micah has some suggestions: do justice, love kindness.

What does the Holy ask of you? How do you do justice and love kindness?

The times are too critical to risk engaging any further in benign complicity, getting caught up in the modern version of bread and circuses.

Only you can decide how your life can change. The first step is a hard look at how your values and priorities manifest in your life. Try hard to step outside the cultural messages which keep you bound. If your life already feels overfull, how will you empty it out? Of what can you let go? How will you walk more lightly on the earth? How will you assist those most downtrodden and vulnerable in our society? The Social Action Committee of the church is small and mighty and little tired. Can you rearrange your life to make room for the work of justice and kindness?

I will leave you with the most hopeful thought of all. You are not alone in your longing for justice, in your longing to have your voice heard and heeded. There are many prophets among us, calling us forward. When I went to hear Jim Wallis speak recently he assured us all that we are not alone. He told us to look about us for evidence. Look about you. You are not alone. Together we can change the wind.

And in words of the prophet Amos,  
Justice will roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Blessed be.  
Amen.