

OUR COMPASS - Matins
[written in oral form]

Matthew 23:1-12
Proper 26, Year A

November 5, 2017
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It seems, these days, that most leaders love their place of honour.
They love their power and the attention it brings them.
I'm sure there are some who seek to be leaders for noble reason / in order to serve. Yet, the saying "power corrupts" seems to be too often the case.

The Matthew text presents Jesus' strong condemnation on leaders who abuse the trust given to them,.....and this passage also serves as a warning to us.

Jesus challenged the leaders and the power structure, and keep in mind, in those days, it was hard to separate religious power from political power. So, this mandate can be applied to politics, too.

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Jesus criticized the leaders for being defenders of the status-quo. People in power tend to enjoy and even enhance the perks and privileges they have. Subsequently, the weight of their mantel becomes a heavy burden on the weak and poor.

We can easily conclude, from the reading the Bible, that God loves the poor and weak more than the rich and powerful.

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Generally, those in power/ those at the top...really appreciate the current system. The established social structure has and does serve them well. They don't want to change the system, and they surely don't want to empower the masses. Moreover, they don't want to accept these words from Jesus.

An unjust power system rewards those at the top, and strives to keep things stable, constant and without change. Such corrupt leaders tend to instill the masses with a fear of change... as if any change will lead to chaos.

In essence, the Kings of the hill...ice the slope for everyone else.

For example, once a person has extra money, it is easy to keep it and make more money. On the other hand, it's very expensive to be poor.

Even Mennonite banking institutions reward the affluent with better perks and better interest rates for those with more money.

Large corporations get better tax breaks and price discounts, and that structure is NOT a level playing field.

It is the law of the jungle...where the strong prevail, BUT such a system is counter to the will of God, according to Jesus.

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Jesus criticized the leaders for oppressing the people / for putting a heavy burden on the less fortunate, and for doing nothing to change the system.

Yet interestingly, Jesus suggested to the crowd that they should still listen to those leaders. It seems that their message was Biblically sound, even though they were living a contradiction.

Nevertheless, there are significant expectations on leaders.  
And, in a complicated, post-modern world, we need capable experts to help give us direction / to help us on our journey.  
But, ...we must be careful who we follow, who we admire and who we worship.  
Leaders who love the power, will do whatever it takes to retain their status,.... including honing and polishing their image as a powerful person.  
Corrupt leaders will reward those who obey them--who submit, and corrupt leaders will punish those who question their authority.  
Look for those telltale signs.

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In Jesus' time, the religious leaders would carry sections of the torah in a leather bag, called a phylactery. They also wore a robe with fringes to remain people of their status.
Some had a very big leather bag, and their robe had extra long fringes to make sure everyone saw their grand stature and piety.

Jesus berated that ostentatious show of self exaltation.

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The same happens today. People in leadership strive to look the part.

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We humans are fascinating creatures, we submit to... and admire powerful leaders,.....and ...we want them to look the part, too.

Title and a strong image projects power, and it also steals it from others.

Most people admire and submit to those who radiate confidence and power, yet confidence does NOT mean competence.

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Mass admiration and devotion feed and contribute to a leader's delusion of being powerful,.....and therefore, it is the people who participate in corrupting a leader.

Every leader is very responsible for his/her actions; however, the followers of egocentric leaders are to blame as well.

Strong and powerful leaders are given their power,... by the people.

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No doubt, many people in positions of authority are good, honest and trustworthy, and that is wonderful. Even so, regardless of their virtues, don't hesitate to question and challenge them; don't worship or follow them,.....and always use Jesus as the measure for evaluation.

Jesus is our compass.....and our plumb line.

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Shifting power to the top and reinforcing an unjust power structure is counter to Christ's message,.....and it is misguided.

Leader / hero worship hurts the leader .... and the follower.

It hurts everyone.

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When I was at seminary, I did my supervised ministry in a very large and prestigious church. I was thrilled and honoured that the greatly admired lead minister, Steve Shoemaker, agreed to be my ministry supervisor.

He was a well respected leader in the denomination, a impressive preacher and very charismatic. We was adored by many.

In addition, Steve associated with some of the nation's political leaders. He even conducted the wedding for Mitch McConnell, who is the current Senate majority leader in the US.

I felt fortunate to have him as my mentor.

Yet, in time, I began to see behaviours and attributes that were perplexing.

For example, after one Sunday service, I introduced him to a friend of mine...who came to church with me.

My friend's name was George Schram. He happened to be Dutch, but more noticeable was his very casual appearance and his hair that looked like Einstein's on a bad hair day.

I said to Steve, "I'd like to introduce my friend, George, to you."

Steve glanced at him, and dismissively said, "Oh, Hi", and moved his focus to someone else.

As I was thinking, "That was rude", someone touched Steve on the shoulder and said, "That's George Schram, the new conductor of the Louisville symphony."

Steve instantly wheeled around, and with a smooth voice said, "George! Glad to meet you. Let's do lunch this week."

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I learned a lot about Steve that morning.

I learned more a few months later when I confided in Steve that it looked like I would soon be divorced. He quickly replied, "Well that's too bad,.....because it also ends your career. You'll never be called a decent church. Your career is over." In other words, image is everything.

I graduated from seminary, and a year later, I learned even more about Steve. I was also reminded that power corrupts.

Steve Shoemaker had announced his resignation because he caught got having affairs with two women in the church, and neither was his wife.

I suppose he thought he was about the rules. ????

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I love Waterloo North Mennonite Church.

We DO NOT worship our ministers,.....and that's very good.

We keep our ministers humble,.....and I'm serious, that's good.

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Question and challenge those in positions of responsibility and leadership, no matter who they are.

Also, we must be careful and do self examination. We must consider our perks and privileges,.....and how they are affecting us.

Moreover, let us be reminded that Christ is our compass / our guide in a world full of magnetic leaders and heroes.

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So,....if we are having trouble reading that compass... because of the pull from so many others and other things, then take a cue from Jesus:

The TRUE way is upside down.