

S E R M O N O C T . 3 0 2 0 1 1

P R O P H E T 2 6

**Monty
McGovern**

www.sistephens-seattle.org

October 30, 2011
Proper 26—Year A

Micah 3:5-12
1 Thessalonians 2:9-13,17-20
Matthew 23:1-12

Please be seated.

Micah has set the standard for my homily today. I figure that if, after I am finished, Laurelhurst is not plowed as a field and Seattle has not become a heap of ruins, then I did OK.

Once again the time has come to kick off another stewardship season. Doing this during economic times like these may seem like “tying up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and laying them on the shoulders of others”, as Jesus accuses the Pharisees of doing in today’s Gospel. Nevertheless, his listeners are still to “do whatever they teach you”, so please bear with me as I ask you to do something that is difficult for everyone, including me.

The challenge that I put before you is to forget for a little while the particular activities and people that drew you to St. Stephen’s, as close as they are to your heart, and to concentrate instead on the large community that it is and the even larger community that it serves. All of us, including me, are apt to fall into the trap of thinking of the church as a big department store laying out its wares before its customers. We pick and choose what we care for and want to support and ignore the other things. Surely this is reasonable; after all, no one walks into a store expecting to buy every item on the shelf. What’s wrong with one person singing in the choir, while another serves on the altar guild, while yet another does outreach, and so on? Nothing at all, as far as each person and the activities he or she does is concerned; the problem is that if each of you think only about the particular activities you do, then we don’t have a community. The items in a store do nothing by themselves; someone must buy them in order for anything good to come of them. The people who make up St. Stephen’s, thank God, are not like that. Their activities and interactions with each other have their own organic life. These would be intrinsically good even apart from anything they accomplish in the outside world. This is why the metaphor that St. Paul chose for the members of a church is not the wares in a store, nor even the workers in a factory, but the parts of a body. They form a single entity that depends on all of them to remain healthy and strong. But it is not enough just for all of them to be in the same place at the same time. They must also cooperate with and support each other, however disparate their individual tasks are. I therefore challenge all of you not only to give more than you have in the past but also to give more broadly, each doing what you can to maintain and support the community as a whole in everything that it does.

The theme that the Stewardship Team has chosen for this year’s campaign is “Eat, Pray, Love” (or, unofficially, “Eat, Pay, Love”). We didn’t just choose this because it is catchy, though we do hope that you remember it for a few months at least. Eating, praying, and loving are activities that are immeasurably enriched when done corporately rather than individually. Now the same is not true of paying in general. When I pay my phone bill it doesn’t give me any pleasure to know that thousands of others are doing the same. But the special kind of paying that I do to this community is quite different. I am supporting and enriching not just good causes but myself, precisely because others in the community, ideally every member of it, is doing the same.

In fact, the members of this church are more than just a community; they are a family. We care and pray for each other as well as the world, multiplying our joys and dividing our griefs by sharing them with our fellows. This is what the Pharisees in today’s Gospel fail to do. Jesus did not deny that they sincerely love God and do their best to obey his laws. He freely admitted that the other Jews had much to learn from them. But these Pharisees look at the Jews and see only their fellow Pharisees, together with a bunch of slackers who can’t keep the laws as well as they can. They think they are doing their part to keep their faith community going, while in fact they are subverting and weakening it. By failing to do anything to make it more of a family, they make it less of a community.

This past summer I read two novels by Barbara Kingsolver, entitled "The Bean Trees" and "Pigs in Heaven". In both of them the notion of family plays a central role. In the first, a single woman is confronted by a stranger in a parking lot, who thrusts a Cherokee toddler into her arms, saying "Take care of her". Later she signs papers to legally adopt the child, or so she thinks. In the second book, a sequel to the first, a Cherokee lawyer gets wind of what the woman has done. The lawyer realizes that the adoption is invalid since it was not approved by the Cherokee Nation, as required by an act of Congress in 1978. She manages to track down the child's grandfather and sets out to take the child away from the woman. After many twists and turns all turns out well when the woman's mother winds up marrying the child's grandfather; joint custody of the child is given to the woman who has raised her and her grandfather. One of the best lines in the book occurs towards the end, when a Cherokee social worker meets with the woman, the child, the lawyer, and the grandfather. The woman tearfully admits that her family is weird. The social worker replies: "All families are weird. My job is to see which of them are good places for children." My friends, the St. Stephen's family is weird too. Any family that includes me would have to be. But it's a good place for both children *and* adults. I am proud to be a member of it and hope you all are too. Thank you.

Monty McGovern
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Seattle
www.ststephens-seattle.org