

Praxis of the Humble
First Reading: Micah 3:5-7
Second Reading: Matthew 23:1-12

Few bookies would have wasted any energy even setting the odds that Hollywood would have ever released a rom-com built around the Cleveland Browns and the drama of the NFL draft. You see, football fans would know that, at least in recent history, if you see the nouns *Draft Day* and *The Cleveland Browns* on the same cinema poster, you're going to assume it's a disaster movie. Their quarterback woes are downright Shakespearean. They are still looking for a replacement for Bernie Kosar, and he left the team 30 years ago. Yet, somehow, *Draft Day* works as a rom-com.

The Browns' owner, played by Frank Langella who, as he does so often, portrays the perfect imperious narcissist. In a penultimate scene, he enters Radio City Music Hall with his retinue of assistants and sycophants, never taking off his I'm-a-bagillionaire sunglasses. He is ushered down the iconic hall's aisle to where the Browns' representatives are stationed. He dismissively greets them, not even pausing for small talk as his shaded eyes scan the room to see if enough people are oohing and ahhing over his celebrity and magnificence. And with an air of supreme-self importance, he points to where his employees are seated and says in a way that is half

agitated question, half imperious proclamation, “I’m not sitting there.” An embarrassed staff member stutters something like — “Oh no! Certainly not. You’ll be up on stage.” It was a quintessential “let them eat cake” moment, so weighted with arrogant self-importance, privilege, and entitlement; a re-telling of the first act of the myth of Narcissus, that son of gods beguiled by his own reflection in a pool of water. The story of Narcissus is a myth and *Draft Day* is fiction, obviously because the Browns had a really good day. Yet, the specter of Narcissus, the self-involved pillar of conceit is all too real and the Frank Langella caricature is repeated all around us so frequently it begs the question that with everyone admiring their entitlement, their transcendent influence and privilege, who is left to look out for each other?

The psychologist Erich Fromm said, “The ability to love depends on one’s capacity to emerge from narcissism.” Freud put this creative spin on the same idea — “Those who love have, so to speak, pawned a part of their narcissism.”

Images and real life instances like that of the Cleveland Browns’ owner with his grandiose air of self-importance, his assumptions of superiority, are Pavlovian to me in that the moment I witness it, my teeth

start to grind and I begin fantasizing what sarcasm I could offer that would cut them down to size. That's not good, I know it. Their behavior may spike my blood pressure, but it sure doesn't bother them. They go on oblivious to their own narcissism. Of course, if you remember the story of Narcissus, you know didn't end well, and I have to confess to those times when witnessing the claims of superiority and entitlement by the narcissist, I've wanted to stick around, anxiously hoping to see them fall. Lord, have mercy...

Of course, the ugly truth about narcissism is that we readily see and are worked up by its evidence in others, and yet, it is one of the most difficult things to recognize in ourselves. Truth be told, each of us in some way owns the words of C.S. Lewis in his poem, *As the Ruin Falls*, words that confronted me with so much clarity at an inflection point early in my own faith journey — “All this is flashy rhetoric about loving you. I never had a selfless thought since I was born. I am mercenary and self-seeking through and through: I want God, you, all friends, merely to serve my turn.”

If you can or I can complete the sentence — I'm too important to be seen with or bothered with..., or, I am superior to — we are right in the crosshairs of Jesus' greatest frustration. In Matthew's gospel, our text occurs

in the first half of Holy Week in Jerusalem. The setting is somewhere on the compound of Herod's great temple. The crowds at this point are still with Jesus, and still drawn by his teaching and presence. At the same time, the religious fundamentalists and the temple leaders are ratcheting up the pressure in their plotting against Jesus, confronting him with gotcha questions, trying to entrap this Jesus who is a threat to their eminence and status, power and privilege.

The Pharisees evolved as a fundamentalistic movement that claimed the role of guardian and gatekeeper of Mosaic law. As a guard against cultural assimilation, the Pharisees felt that the restrictive purity laws associated with service in the temple should extend to the daily life of all the people. The scribes, many of whom were also Pharisees, were the scholars, the lawyers, the purported experts in the interpretation and application of Mosaic law.

With increasing intensity the scribes and the Pharisees were challenging Jesus and seeking to undermine his influence and growing authority. By the time we get to Matthew 23, Jesus had had it with their self-righteousness, their pomposity, and their claims of being the sole

authority on the law of God. Our text today is one of Jesus' more aggressive polemics against the status quo of religious life, particularly in the way the fundamentalists were manipulating the law to maintain authority over the people.

Jesus is a bit cheesed, peeved, aggrieved. Jesus doesn't deny their knowledge of Mosaic law, and does not discount the importance of the commands God handed down to Moses. But Jesus does have a big problem with their hypocrisy and their pride and their privilege.

The scribes and Pharisees, according to Jesus, *“do not practice what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi.”*

“They make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long...” Jesus is painting an image here of the insufferable, self-promoting, self-righteous, arrogant, and entitled jerk. A phylactery is a leather box tied to one's head

or arm. It is supposed to be a symbol and reminder of devotion, for placed within the leather box is a written copy of the Shema, the words of praise and devotion that the faithful are to say when they wake in the morning and before they sleep at night. “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” So, as Jesus points to the Pharisees and scribes walking around with these oversized phylacteries, he’s saying that they’re doing it for show, and thus, are performing the opposite of the scripture contained inside the phylactery, drawing the attention of others to them instead of drawing their own attention to God.

Similarly, the long fringes Jesus mentions, refer to the fringes on the end of a prayer shawl. The fringe is called *Tzit-tzit*. In Numbers 15, the Lord said to Moses, “*Speak to the Israelites, and tell them to make fringes on the corners of their garments throughout their generations and to put a blue cord on the fringe at each corner. You have the fringe so that, when you see it, you will remember all the commandments of the Lord and do them, and not follow the lust of your own heart and your own eyes.*” Again, Jesus exposes the Pharisees’ and scribes’ hypocrisy, indicating that the longer, more ostentatious fringe was more about self-promotion than self-offering, more

about pride than humility before God. It was a way of pridefully preening — “Look at me, I’m holy!” Imagine if I strutted up here all self-important, wearing a big ol’ oversized, diamond encrusted cross, and proceeded to read from Philippians 2 — “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited...”

The church’s eminent early theologian, Augustine, said, “Pride is a perverted imitation of God. For pride hates a fellowship of equality under God, and seeks to impose its own dominion on fellow men, in the place of God’s rule.”

I heard someone quote the puffed up lyric of a contemporary cultural icon this week. “I’m not a businessman, I’m a business, man!” Would be influencers, athletes, and strivers talk about establishing their brand, the goal not so much to be a member of the human community but a phenomenon, hovering above the human community; one who doesn’t wait in lines, sits on the front row (except, obviously, in church), commands

attention and privilege, always ushered through the velvet ropes. As Jesus puts it, “They do all their deeds to be seen by others ... They love to have the place of honor at banquets.” Jesus understood the great flaw in human striving, the need to be considered somehow above others, but when you place yourself **above** others, you lose the privilege and joy of being **with** them. Jesus said, “The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

When we pursue celebrity, seek access to power, lust for influence, strive to rise above the competition, focus on our brand, yearn to be noticed, we unwittingly isolate ourselves because we no longer see one another. The wise and thoughtful columnist, David Brooks, has recently been on a mission to understand why we as a people have become so disconnected. He pointed to the statistic that 54% of Americans say that no one knows them well.

We don't know one another well because we don't see one another well. We are becoming socially blind. In a recent delightful interview with Kate Bowler, Brooks said something that I had heard him say before, and it

stuck with me because I've often encountered the same thing. He spoke about the number of times he's left a social occasion, and it strikes him that, the whole evening nobody asked him a question. He said the people were mostly pleasant but no one asked him a question.

We're so intent on establishing our place that we don't pay attention to the very people we're talking to. There's a lot of talking, a lot of self-sharing, but it lacks the curiosity that fosters connection, that allows someone to know they are seen and heard. Brooks suggests this happens for three reasons: ego, insecurity, and basic self-involvement. If someone mentions a bit of good news, instead of asking them to tell us more, we focus on trying to outdo them with better news. And strangely, if someone relates a bad experience, we don't seek to understand their experience, because we are so intent on sharing a worse experience of our own.

Ego, insecurity, self-involvement — social blindness. A lack of curiosity and empathy isolates both us and those we encounter. A social psychologist told Brooks the story “about a guy who is on one side of the river and there's a woman on the other side of the river and she calls out to him, ‘How do I get to the other side of the river?’ And he says, ‘You are on the other

side of the river!” (David Brooks, *Everything Happens with Kate Bowler*) He couldn’t get his head around her predicament because he was only going to approach it from his perspective.

Everybody wants to be seen, heard, understood. Regressively though, fewer people have the patience or will to see, hear, and understand. If you’re obsessed with rising above, you sacrifice the opportunity to be with. Curiosity can be such a gift, not only to the person in front of you but also to yourself as you discover some greater depth to someone of which you had previously been unaware. Curiosity is such a great leveler. We are no longer a threat and no longer threatened, but have become friends. That’s why Jesus came, that we may come to know and be known, love and be loved. It’s not supposed to be an either/or, it’s supposed to be a both/and.

Do you know the people in your life, or are they commodities to be sorted and categorized according to what they can do for you? God gave us this life, not so that we could use one another, but that we would love one another. We’re not meant to rise above, but to live with. You want to be an influencer? Forget the clicks, the likes, and the privileges, and love someone well. Amen.