

The night before last, I had one of the best kinds of humbling experiences. I attended the installation service for Temple Israel's new rabbi, Paul Sidlofsky. Usually, I'm the person who knows the service front to back and inside out, but there, I was struggling to keep up. I revel in helping people to follow, and to understand, the service, but on Friday night, I needed, and received, help from a friendly and gracious member of the Temple congregation. And by the same token, usually I am the one welcoming people to services and events, but there, I was receiving hospitality.

Fortunately, the Temple congregation was truly hospitable, offering a warm and genuine welcome, and appreciation that outsiders would make an effort to support them and their new rabbi. So while it was humbling, I was at ease, and look forward to returning for their "Invite Your Neighbor" service and open house on January 26; you're all invited too, and we'll send out reminders when the event gets closer.

When the newly-installed rabbi came over to me at the oneg, or reception, after the service, I didn't hesitate to greet him as "Rabbi Sidlofsky," even though I knew that this Sunday's Gospel is the one where Jesus explicitly tells his followers to use such titles for no one. Does that make me a bad Christian? Well, only if Jesus was speaking literally. The fact that he routinely answered to the title of "rabbi," or "teacher," himself, and on multiple occasions referred to other men as "father," strongly suggests that he was not.

So, should I just take the modernist's way out and declare that Jesus never really said what St. Matthew attributed to him in this part of his Gospel? I suppose such a thing is always possible. This passage could have been a response to a controversy in the local Christian community for which St. Matthew was writing. But what fun would that be? More importantly, declaring that Jesus never said that would cheat us out of the larger point that I believe Jesus was making, and possibly set us up to make the very mistake he wants his followers to avoid.

The larger point is to live in humility. To know God as a Christian or a Jew is to know that God is far greater than us, in every good way, and to know that nothing and no one can or should take God's place for us or for anyone else, as well as knowing that we are all ultimately completely dependent on God. This last observation is inherently part of every stewardship message, but our dependence goes deeper than money, deeper even than time and talent; we depend on God for our very existence. God is the one in whom we "live and move and have our being."

But we sure don't act that way sometimes. Human beings put all manner of things in the place of God. False prophets like the ones Micah warned of and railed against are a problem in every age. Clergy, of all people, should know enough about God that we wouldn't even want to have his job. But today, I think the problem is a bit different than it was in ancient times. There must have been a real problem with religious leaders behaving as Jesus described, and people falling for the act, or else it wouldn't have made any sense for Jesus to say those words, or for Matthew to include

them in his Gospel. But today, while I suppose there are still a few people who put their clergy on a pedestal, and there are certainly arrogant, pompous, and self-righteous clergy out there, and these things do bother me, the much greater risk seems to be people who put themselves in the place of honor, and even in the place of God.

Religious leaders have never been perfect. We've never had all the answers. But we try to connect people with God as best we can with word and, for Christians, sacrament. Increasingly today, though, people dismiss everything in and about religion, not just the clergy and our pronouncements but the very idea that religion has anything to offer — and thereby choose to substitute their own judgment for God's. If that's not putting yourself in the place of God, I don't know what is. The Pharisees at least had the decency to be subtle, adding their own interpretations to the Law of Moses, and insisting that those interpretations carried as much weight, so to speak, as the actual Law.

Micah described what happens when people do that sort of thing. In a way, they get exactly what they want. When Micah talks about night falling upon false prophets, he also isn't speaking literally, for of course the same literal daylight and night fall upon everyone. A clue to what Micah was talking about is his mention of God withholding vision and revelation and answers. In other words, God allows people to reject God, cut themselves off, and wander astray, even though it's the biggest mistake we could make.

While God never stops loving us, one aspect of that love is that God never forces us to be in relationship with God, despite knowing only too well the terrible consequences of rejecting God. Micah described the consequences in stark terms: "Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height." Things like that did literally happen, but I believe that these verses can also be taken metaphorically, to describe what happens in peoples' souls when they reject, or try to replace, God. I think it's not so much punishment as it is cause and effect.

In Bible study on Thursday, some of the participants said Micah sounded angry, and maybe he was. He certainly didn't like what was happening around him. But I interpret his tone as more like an urgent warning, a desperate attempt to tell individuals, or a society, that they're headed off a cliff.

But of course, that was not the end of the story. Faithfulness did not disappear entirely. The Jewish nations of Israel and Judea were nonetheless conquered and taken into exile, an experience of suffering and trauma to be sure, but God did not reject them. In the midst of that suffering, God met them where they were, forged them into a new, stronger version of themselves, and inspired them to start writing down their scriptures in the form we have today. And, in God's good time, God used a human ruler to allow them to return to their homeland and rebuild, in every sense of the word.

So as concerned as I am about modern society's increasing rejection of God and the church, if I thought God was done with us, I would not be preaching to you right

now. Humbly, I believe that God is still very much in control of history and the universe, and I wouldn't have it any other way. And likewise, I'm not so arrogant as to think I know how or when God "has to" intervene and right every wrong, but I have faith that God will.

This does not mean there is nothing we can, or should, do in the meantime. St. Paul's letter to the Thessalonians has some sound and simple advice. Lead a life worthy of God, constantly give thanks to God, accept the Word of God, and rejoice that God's Word is at work in us already. We might go further still, once we feel strong in our faith, by imitating the example of Paul and his companions in reaching out to others who do not have a relationship with God, not with arrogance, pomposity, or self-righteousness, but the loving care of parents who want to see their children thrive. Or perhaps even the sincere, affectionate welcome and appreciation that we are blessed, and humbled, both to give and to receive.