

“Tis A Gift to be Humble”

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Matthew 23: 1-12

Using the scribes and Pharisees as negative examples of faithfulness, Jesus teaches the crowds and disciples a great paradox: those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who are humble will be exalted. Listen for and hear God’s word to us in these words of Jesus.

Matthew 23: 1-12

There is nothing easy about today’s text. We’d like to think it’s easy, but it’s not. It sounds like Jesus is criticizing bad people. Over the years, we, Christians, have come to believe that the Pharisees were the bad guys. They weren’t. The Pharisees were the church going people of their day—the ones who tried to live according to the religious laws. Even Jesus, himself, was raised in the tradition of Pharisaic Judaism. So, in essence, Jesus is criticizing his fellow Jews who made a show of their faith for public benefit.

What Jesus wanted was for the religious leaders to act like leaders and not like celebrities or royalty. He wanted them to stop showing off. And he wanted them to live by the same rules they were forcing on others. He wanted them to practice the ‘golden rule’: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.’ Not the one we hear so often: ‘He who has the gold, rules.’

This was not just a problem in Jesus’ day. We face it all the time. We can easily point to many of the televangelists and pastors of large mega-churches who begin to take themselves so seriously that they get caught with their hands in the cookie jars—sex scandals, misuse of church funds, million dollar book deals, and egos the size of corporate CEO’s. They have forgotten that as shepherds of the sheep, they’re called to work in the fields, not just look down on them from their ivory towers.

Jesus was very critical of people who used their status—either financial or religious—to make life harder for others. He didn’t like one set of rules for the privileged and another set for everyone else. He was especially incensed when the most vulnerable—the marginalized—the widows, orphans, and handicapped—were the victims of this hierarchy.

In Paul’s letter to the church in Thessalonica, he goes out of his way to make it clear that he and his associates are trying very hard to not be a burden to the church people. He says that they worked so as not to be a burden.

Paul was trying to model behavior appropriate to church and community leaders. He was working and preaching, not expecting special treatment because of his status as an apostle of the church. Paul was trying to practice appropriate humility.

Humility is a difficult thing isn't it? Willimon says: "...Humility is unnatural. Even those who happily serve behind the scenes yearn for a little recognition now and then. Humility is not found in the created order. Not even among humans. As Mark Twain recognized, the moment a person seems to have achieved real humility, it is destroyed by the pride at having accomplished it. Humility is not a natural thing. It is, rather, a gift of grace. Like patience and kindness, it comes as an endowment of the Spirit. When God gives faith, God empowers us to be what we are not and cannot be. Humility is not in the order of creation, but in the order of new creation. And, it is a renewable gift, for things lost in sin are regained in God's ceaseless outpouring of love." (Pulpit Resource, p.23)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor killed by Hitler, during World War II, said in his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*: "Our activity must be visible, but never be done for the sake of making it visible. "Let your light so shine before others"...and yet: Take care that you hide it!...That which is visible must also be hidden. The awareness on which Jesus insists is intended to prevent us from reflecting on our extraordinary position. We have to take heed that we do not take heed of our own righteousness. Otherwise the 'extraordinary' which we achieve will not be that which comes from following Christ, but that which springs from our own will and desire." (Pulpit Resource, p.24)

Humility in following Jesus without making ourselves the model of the good Christian is hard to pull off. Last week I told you that I really did learn in seminary that pastors are not supposed to be the 'good' example in their sermons, but it's hard not to encourage others to do and be good without sharing our own personal struggles in that regard. Being Christian leaders should be a humbling experience. Daring to get into the pulpit and preach and interpret the word of God should be humbling. But if you get good at it, pride takes over.

On this All Saints' Sunday, we can look back through the pages of time to see the multitudes of humble people of faith who created, supported, reformed and continued building the body of Christ, we call the church. Through their lives of sacrifice and service, millions of people were introduced to Jesus and drawn into his church. We, ourselves, are direct descendents of these humble saints.

One of the commentaries says: "Standing on the inside of the church, hearing Jesus level his verbal attacks against religious leaders who are trying to hold together their faith in the midst of a world on edge, I begin to sympathize much more with the Pharisees. They are under a great deal of pressure to lead their flock in a time of great uncertainty. Israel's future continues to lie precariously at the hands of a pagan empire that is not always sympathetic to a Jewish religious outlook. They're doing the best they can to hold their people together. Jesus' constant criticism doesn't seem very helpful." (The Minister's Manual, p.135)

I'm not sure I agree. What I think Jesus was trying to do then and do with us now, is to help us keep our egos in check. Not just for those of us who are clergy, but for all of us who think we have this pride and ego think in balance. When we act as if, we alone have

all the answers—when we alone have this God and Jesus thing straight—when we alone know what’s right and wrong—we’re in trouble.

Isn’t this a great message the Sunday before election day? I think it is.

As people of faith, we are called to live in the world—to participate in the management of our community and our world. As people of faith, we are reminded that our citizenship also resides on a higher plane of existence. That means we are to live in this world by the values and aspirations of the other world. Some political ads will tell you that to be a Christian means that you should vote a certain way. To this I remind you that last week we were reminded that the greatest commandments tell us to love God with all our hearts and souls and minds and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves—we’re called to seek justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God. Let’s take that message with us as we cast our ballots.

Our ancestors in faith courageously lived their lives in humble and dedicated service to the living God. “When true simplicity is gained, to bow and to bend, we shan’t be ashamed, to turn, turn, will be our delight till by turning, turning, we come down right.” When we turn our hearts and minds to God in true simplicity or humbleness, we end up where we are supposed to be.

Thanks be to God. Amen.