

SOMETHING

We being our lesson this morning we Jesus critique of the scribes and the Pharisees. Jesus criticism focuses on three concerns: The scribes and Pharisees “say but do not do.” Let us first note that Jesus acknowledges that what they teach is acceptable: “...therefor, do whatever they teach you and follow it.” That’s not the problem. The problem, as Jesus sees it is that they do not “practice what they teach.” They don’t walk their talk, or as the columnist Molly Ivins quipped about folks who wanted to be Texans but really weren’t “they’re all hat and no cattle.”

Jesus’ second concern is that they burden others while failing to act themselves. As preacher Thomas Long notes, they imposed on the people,

a myriad of rules, standards, and directives, and the whole process easily degenerated into moral bean counting. The procedures were so cumbersome that no human being could possibly accomplish them; no one could ever hope to keep the full weight of all these laws and carry the heavy freight of this ethical load, not even the scribes and Pharisees themselves.

Basically, they just “acted” the part which is a pretty literal translation of the Greek word we usually translate as “hypocrite”: play actor.

And lastly, Jesus decries the motivation of the scribes and Pharisees: they only do things so as to make an impression on others; to win honor, respect, and acknowledgement from others.

It is tempting to read this passage and simply point a finger at the scribes and Pharisees and see them as examples of what we should not do without seeing ourselves in the criticism. Let us remember that Jesus is not, in fact, actually addressing the scribes and Pharisees at this point in the story. That conversation pretty much wrapped up after the passage we heard last week in which, Jesus, after being grilled by the scribes and Pharisees asked them a question they couldn’t answer. Today, we find Jesus not in conversation with the scribes and Pharisees, but with the crowds and his disciples. This is a lesson intended for Jesus’ followers who wouldn’t be getting it unless they were in need of it. Clearly, Matthew felt similarly as we was composing his gospel as the early church was emerging. So, we really shouldn’t be looking down our noses at anyone until we’ve taken a good hard look at ourselves.

Jesus’s followers today are regularly criticized for not “walking their talk,” for preaching one message and then acting otherwise. As mainline Protestants I think we tend to let ourselves off the hook on this one, readily responding to such criticism by pointing the finger at other Christians. “We’re not like that – that’s those other guys” – people like Prosperity Gospel preachers, so-called conservative evangelicals. And yet, we have our own forms of these foibles. We are so sure that we are in the right at times that we readily objectify others as ill-informed, un-informed, and misguided. If only they knew what we knew. If only, they had read the latest research. If only, they could and would understand. In our efforts to convince others of our rightness, we cease listening, we abandon understanding, and we marginalize the life experience and lived realities of others. We say we love our neighbors but sometimes it sounds a bit like we love the folks who agree with us a whole lot more. Remember – in the faith we follow, as I

mentioned last week, love is something we choose to do. It is not a feeling – it is an intentional commitment to being a certain way in the world. And it's not easy.

We are rapidly approaching Election Day – a decisive and divisive moment for our nation. No matter who ultimately is elected there will be much work for us to do to help restore wholeness, health, and neighborliness to our country. If the past four years has taught us anything it's that we can't depend on our elected national leaders in Congress or the White House to accomplish this. We will have to become practiced in conversing with those who radically different views than we do. We will need to learn to listen more deeply, whether we agree with folks or not, in order to at least understand them. We will need to speak this and allow more room for others to share out of their live experiences so that we can truly get to know their joys and fears, what nourishes and sustains them as well as what keeps them up at night. We will need to diligently practice neighborliness.

Think of Jesus' criticism about the desire to be recognized and acknowledged. Are we really so different from the scribes and Pharisees? Isn't this part and parcel of being human? As one commentator has noted:

We all like to be acknowledged at social gatherings; we all like to be greeted in the marketplace. It is not a matter of being hypocritical, but of being human: We are social creatures, and we like to be known and liked; it strikes at our sense of self-worth to be ignored or subtly put down socially. All of us live under internally imposed constraints of peer pressure and the desire to be accepted by others, to be insiders, to belong... Matthew proposes an alternative world, a world seen from the perspective of God, an alternative family where the approval of God removes the heavy yoke of self-justification.

And what about burdening others. Hmmmm. When I think about the usual pre-COVID frenzy of activity that the Oberlin community annually undertakes, it often gives me pause. It's not that folks don't have good and worthy ideas. It's just that I questioned at times how many of them we really need to take on all at once. Last week, I was working from home and took a brief pause to look out the window at the leaves falling from the trees. It was beautiful fall day and the richly colored leaves wafted down one after the other. I can't remember the last time I actually noticed leaves falling from the trees. Typically, September and October, up until about fall recess, is so chock full of activity there is no time for such luxuries – there are committees to attend and follow up to do, projects and events to plan, people to engage, publicity to get out.

Jesus comments about the scribes and Pharisees offered his followers the chance to check in with themselves. To pause and consider the faith they were following and to check the alignment with the life they were actually living. The current pandemic offers us a similar opportunity. It's a type of sabbatical – one that we did not ask for, but perhaps one that can also provide us with blessing. Our Stewardship theme this year is “Beloved, Love...” love our church community, love our local, Oberlin community, love our global community. This time of forced diminished activity allows us the chance to pause, and think about what we are doing, to consider how we might re-center ourselves, our church, our mission and ministry, in preparation for how we want to re-emerge as a congregation post-COVID.

Who do you want to be post COVID? Who do we, as First Church, want to be post COVID? What gifts, opportunities has COVID given us? “Beloved, loved...” - suggests intimacy. COVID has brought us a new sense of intimacy. Many/most will not want to return to the old normal (e.g., racism/turmoil, unfettered income inequality, unfocused busyness). What are the key things we want to focus on? Could we imagine a year in which, as a church, we focused on not 10 things, or 5 things, or 3 things, but just one thing? Among us as a congregation we have all these interests; we can’t be involved in many of them right now but we have the chance to prioritize, to move away from frenetic life. When “franticness is taken away” – can we recognize it as a gift? What aren’t you going to post COVID?

A few years ago, the Westside Theological Forum, which is a group of UCC churches including First Church, hosted Shane Claiborne as its speaker. Shane is one of the so-called “new monastics” and lives in community in Philadelphia. He and others live simple lives in community together with focused attention on the needs of the disadvantaged and marginalized in their neighborhood. Following his presentation, pastors were invited to have lunch with Shane and to ask him questions. When my turn came I told Shane a bit about the Oberlin community, our passion around issues of social justice and the challenges of trying to take on all the world’s problems. “How do you select which issue/issues of social justice to focus upon?” I asked. Shane, graciously and lovingly replied, “If your church is truly connected to its community it will know what issues need to be addressed.”

19th century, historian, author, and Unitarian minister Edward Everett Hale said,

“I am only one, but I am one. I cannot do everything, but I can do something. And because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.”

What is the “something” God is calling First Church to be and do? What is the “something” God is calling you to do?

I’d like to close with some words from William C. Martin in his book “The Art of Pastoring”:

Thought 34 - True Greatness

The parish that is filled with the Word
gives birth to countless wonderful things,
yet it lays no claim to them.
It brings nurture to many people,
yet it does not seek to count them.
Its work permeates the hearts of the community,
yet the community does not know it is there,
they only know that they feel content.
This parish and this pastor
do not know that they are great.
The community does not know
that they are great.
Therefore they are truly great.

AMEN.