

Sermon, November 5, 2023

Matthew 23:1-12

“The Importance of Humility”

In this reading we find Jesus in one of several confrontations with the scribes and Pharisees. These two groups were essentially lawyers and teachers of the law. In this encounter Jesus is a bit more judgmental than usual, but these guys obviously, seemed to get under his skin. Take note that Jesus was not arguing against what they were teaching, but rather pointing out that they were not living up to what they taught. They were talking the talk, but not walking the walk. This is something that all Christians must bear in mind. If we profess to be Christian, then we must act in a Christian manner if the world is to take our faith seriously. As the song goes, “They will know we are Christian by our love.” Many will fail to believe what we believe if we act in a hateful and mean-spirited way. I can’t help but wonder if that is why the church in the 21st century is sliding down hill. Too many churches speaking out in ways that do not reflect the love of our Lord.

Jesus also lashes out at the scribes and Pharisees lack of humility. They flaunt their personal piety in public to bolster their own authority and status in the community. As Jesus says, “They do all their deeds to be seen by others...They love to have the place of honor at banquets, and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be treated with respect in the marketplace, and to have people call them rabbi”.

In the second chapter of Romans, and the tenth chapter of Acts, both Paul and Peter point out that God does not show partiality. Other translations say that God is no respecter of persons. What this means is that God does not show favoritism of one person over another, but also, that God is not impressed by a person’s worldly status. This, for example, is why Jesus is bothered by their insisting that people call them rabbi.

Now I confess that I am not terribly bothered when people address me as Reverend or Pastor, and I get a kick out of it when I wear my clerical collar, and people in Publix, or on the street say, “ Hello, Father”. (Also, when I was in a previous congregation, I used to insist that the children address me as “your holiness” - but that’s another story.)

But here is the reality. Titles, belong to the aristocracy. Clergy persons are servants. That’s why I am perfectly fine with people addressing me as David. The simple fact is that however we are addressed by other people has no real bearing on how God looks at us. We are all equal in God’s eyes.

Jesus saw humility as something of great importance in this world. He said, "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted." If I may quote theologian, Stanley Hauerwas, " This is a hard lesson to learn for crafty creatures like us, capable of transforming any position, even the position of slave or servant, into a position of power and prestige. We desire that others regard us without the necessity that we regard them. Such is our fear of being otherwise lost in the cosmos, Jesus singles out the wiles of the scribes and the Pharisees for condemnation, but the games that the scribes and Pharisees play are variations on the games we all play".

Now, there is another issue that this reading brings up that is both very timely and very important, and that is that sadly Jesus' condemnation of the scribes and Pharisees has been used, along with other statements in the New Testament, as an excuse to condemn all Jews, and Judaism itself. Unfortunately, we can look down through the centuries and see the great tragedies this unfair assumption has brought about. The events of October 7 have opened, or brought to the forefront, the deep levels of both antisemitism and Islamophobia, on a worldwide basis. In our country alone. On the streets, before synagogues, and on college campuses, violent attacks upon Jews have risen 380% since October 7th. Such forms of hatred have no place in any society, and certainly, not within Christian hearts. God gifted us with something called brains, and until we fully learn to use them rather than forms of violence to solve the world's problems, we will never have a peaceful planet! Humility must play an important part in that, leading us to truly recognize the equality of all persons in the eyes of God - to love our neighbors as ourselves, and to recognize the sinfulness of such hatred.. And the Church should not and cannot remain silent, but it must condemn such evil for God's sake, and for the sake of a better world! Amen.

**Let us pray:** God of great wisdom and of unparalleled love, we come before you today to worship , to offer thanksgiving for the many blessings of this life, and to seek guidance as we face the many problems we face as individuals, as a congregation of faith, as a nation, and as a world. Our world is so terribly impacted by the evils of hate and needless violence, and we look to your Son Jesus to guide us in the ways of love and peace. Help us, and show us, how we may humble ourselves in ways that are compatible with Your will for us and for the world. Likewise, grant us the courage to speak out against the evils that undermine the dignity of all people. Give us the faith we need, and light before us a beacon of hope illuminating the possibility of a brighter and better future...Amen.