

October 30, 2011

Matthew 23:1-12

By now we've become familiar with the back and forth between Jesus and the religious establishment. The overarching theme that comes from studying the last several weeks of Gospel lessons is the real sense that the religious leadership of Judaism lost touch with its base. Rather than serving the people and being a model of godly living, the leadership set itself up as the top level of a caste system that dealt out salvation as a commodity.

In our lesson today, we hear Jesus saying basically this very thing. He tells his listeners to follow the teachings from the Torah. But he warns people not to follow the example of those who are doing the teaching. Even the image of their office has been tainted. They love to show their elaborate prayer shawls, but the *action* and *attitude* that should flow from a life of prayer just isn't there.

I think this lesson is a stark reminder of how easily it is for any of us to get off track. It's a good practice to step back and ask what's important. What do we really need in order to be a people of God? And what gets in the way of our faith?

Historically in the Church, there have been movements touted as “reform” that target one thing or another to eliminate, with the idea that *that* will make our faith more pure. Full of righteous zeal, people have done away with images in the church – no paintings or pictures allowed. Others, like the Puritans, targeted stained glass, and had it all taken out. Still other reformers have focused on eliminating music, or what the minister wears. In an attempt to not be identified with the hypocrites that Jesus points out in this gospel, many religious practices have been erased in the name of holiness. But I’m not so sure that we’re any more or less sincere in our faith because of these so called reforms.

So what do we need to be a people of faith, and what gets in our way of that? It’s us. We need each other in order to be a community. And we are the biggest problem in a faith community. Too often, Gandhi’s take on Christians rings true. He said, "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ." And yet... and yet... the opposite is true, too. At our best, we make Christ known for each other. We all have our stories on both sides of the experience of faith communities. Our experiences range from being wounded and disappointed at the hands of fellow Christians, to having a brother or sister in Christ open new vistas of faith for us, and expand our understanding of

God. Unfortunately, our experiences of true faith will always go hand in hand with a healthy dose of the pettiness of humanity. Those who want purity will leave in disgust, because the church is full of sinners trying to find their way. Religious life is not a tidy matter, nor is it easy. And unfortunately we make our mistakes on each other. Knowing that we will at times tread on the hearts of another, should make us all more careful in our interactions as we deal with the precious human cargo that God has entrusted to us in community.

In today's lesson, Jesus points out that people are both the source of corruption of faith and at the same time, our best hopes for getting faith right. As we try to live out the repercussions of "The greatest among you will be your servant", we also need to be mindful of how scripture has been used to maintain systems of inequality. Equality before God is Jesus' revolutionary call to arms. The concept that God's love is universal and limitless is the source from which all else flows in Jesus' Gospel. It's the concept on which we as Christians have to model our *own* love.

This is where I think hospitality comes to mean so much for me. It's the great equalizer when we realize that meeting Christ can happen at any time. Hospitality is the active seeking of Christ *in* our neighbor and the active sharing of Christ *with* our neighbor at the same time.

Our challenge in this day and age is probably not found in reforming the church by removing stained glass or images of saints. I think the challenge of our faith in this day and age is removing the barriers that we place between one another, particularly the visitor in our midst. Radical hospitality joins belief with action, and transforms our faith from a personal piety to a transformative force for good in the world. If we really believe that at *any* moment, the person sitting next to us might show you Christ, or that *you* might show Christ *to* that person... if we believe that, then living that out in our coffee hour and in the welcome that we give to those who enter those doors back there is the first step. A small thing, right? Wrong. It's letting Christ loose in a world that's crying out for God's love. It's *revolutionary* to dare to welcome everyone and anyone like a brother or sister beloved by Our shared Father. Let's begin the revolution with open doors and open hearts to God and to our neighbor. Amen.