

Hypocrisy, Discipleship, and Equality

Year A, Proper 26
Matthew 23:1-12

I never cease to be amazed at how dense Scripture can be. Once you scratch the surface, there are always several layers beneath. Jesus often had problems with the religious authorities of his time; you don't often call a group of people a "brood of vipers" without ticking off at least a few of them. In the reading for today, Jesus gives them their due by recognizing that they have authority by virtue of their offices, yet as with all humans, they succumb to vanity, arrogance and hypocrisy. As a result, Jesus urges his listeners to do as the Pharisees say and not as they do. He recognizes the soundness of the Jewish laws, although not the way they have been carried out. He gives examples of the authorities talking the talk but not walking the walk. They desire that eyes to be drawn to them with their outward show of piety, instead of directing eyes heavenward.

Beneath this surface layer that describes the hypocrisy of some of the religious authorities of the time, we see another layer describing the meaning of discipleship. Jesus is telling his listeners the true meaning of discipleship, namely talking the talk and walking the walk. There are as many ways of expressing discipleship as there are disciples. In spite of these different expressions, however, we are united through a common calling and sacramental life. Our Gospel passage recognizes our human condition that pulls us constantly toward sin. St. Augustine defined sin as that which provokes alienation from God and one another, and these things are generally rooted in pride. Pride is what puts our own interests above God's. We tend to promote our own fiefdoms instead of doing things to further God's reign. True faithfulness, the faith of a disciple, is found in the orientation of one's heart toward God.

Peeling our way down to yet another layer, we see the issue of equality. Even though discipleship manifests itself in different ways, we are all basically equal. A great example of this is the Occupy Wall Street, Occupy Oakland, Occupy LA, and Occupy Most-Major-Cities movement going on right now. The New York movement has the motto "We are the 99%". Not only do we see unemployed youths camping out, but also teachers, bankers, union workers, stockbrokers and almost every other profession. These individuals are different on their surface, but they are drawn together by a desire to change things. While their goals are quite different, they are frankly not all that dissimilar to the Tea Party. Pursuit of their goals overrides whatever individual differences they have on the surface. In God's eyes, we are all equal and deserving of God's love, regardless of our individual strength or social standing. All social distinctions and special offices devised by humans must be understood as functional rather than essential.¹ This is what Jesus was getting at in the last two sentences of our reading, "The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted." First Corinthians, Chapter 12 echoes this; "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone."

A way we can live out our discipleship is to offer our time, talent and treasure in furthering God's reign here on earth. We have Jesus as our guide in helping us decide what disciples should do. As a congregation, we have recognized our little slice of discipleship and what we can do at Faith. That slice is known as our mission statement, and I'll repeat it again for

¹ Tim Beach-Verhey, "Theological Perspective: Proper 26, Matthew 23:1-12", *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4*, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2011), 260-264.

your reference. “The mission of Faith Episcopal Church is to pursue a deeper understanding of the mystery of God, to offer the hospitality of the Gospel, and to work for a just and compassionate community.” It is the job of the Bishop’s Committee under your direction to ensure that we are faithful to this call for ministry.

The way we are able to carry out this mission is through stewardship. I want to emphasize what I talked about last week regarding the nature of stewardship. Stewardship is not about meeting financial or budgetary needs. It is a way of responding to God’s love for us, as individuals and as a congregation. Good stewardship is good management and good planning. Good stewardship is putting God first. Good stewardship is preparing the way for those who come after us. We are all beneficiaries of the past good stewardship of our predecessors. Look around at the wonderful building that we’re occupying. The Suttons certainly could have given their money to a number of other organizations, but they chose to spend it here in the service of God’s church. Their generosity is an inspiration and example for all of us.

There is another result of stewardship: we are able to sense a difference in ourselves when we participate in stewardship. We know that we have adjusted our priorities to be in line with our beliefs. Stewardship is a response to our discipleship, and I can tell you from personal experience, one gets a deep sense of satisfaction when we can see material progress made toward God’s call to us. Often after a natural disaster, people respond overwhelmingly in providing donations to help others. While their motivation is charitable, a result of their giving is a sense of satisfaction in being able to do something material in alleviating people’s suffering instead of being only a spectator. The suffering doesn’t stop, though, once all the wreckage is cleared away and the camera crews go home. Even in places with no natural disasters, even in places like Laguna Niguel, there are people suffering, people who are aimless, people who are isolated and many, many others who need help. These are the people, some of whom are sitting next to you, who are addressed in our mission statement when we pursue a deeper understanding of the mystery of God, offer the hospitality of the Gospel, and work for a just and compassionate community. These are the people who aren’t necessarily on CNN or Fox News, but they still need help. We respond to God’s love for us by taking care of all of God’s beloved creation. This type of stewardship is what is addressed in Genesis after God created everything and gave people dominion over it all. Dominion does not mean that humans are to beat God’s creations into submission and abuse them. Stewardship is caring for God’s creation and creatures while we are here on earth.

Last Wednesday during our Hands of Grace outreach dinner, I gave a letter to one of the homeless clients that was addressed to him using our address. This letter was from Faith, although I wasn’t sure what it was since I hadn’t sent it. The recipient opened the letter, grinned, and said, “Do you know what this is?” I said, “No,” and he told me that it was a letter requesting money, namely our stewardship letter. He thought it was ironic that the church that was providing him free meals on Wednesday nights was asking for a donation. I thought it was ironic as well, but the more I thought about it in the following days, I thought, no, this is fully appropriate. While the pride and arrogance demonstrated by the Pharisees might be the source of sin for the powerful, the source of sin for the weak and oppressed is withdrawal from God and from neighbors. These down-trodden individuals often assume they have nothing to offer. They embrace their own supposed inferiority and use it as an excuse not to contribute to the common good.² Jesus expressly addressed this in the story of the widow’s mite, describing the old woman who offered only a couple of pennies, but they were everything she had. Please understand at

² *Ibid.* 264.

this point, I'm not suggesting that this individual should sign over his social security check to the Church. Time and talent are additional ways that we can respond to God for the gifts that have been bestowed on us. And to be truthful, this person has volunteered to do things around the church in the past, yet he didn't recognize that his volunteering was a way of contributing to the mission of Faith. Next time I see him, I'm going to urge him, and I'm urging all of you right now, to fill out the pledge cards that have been mailed to you, with whatever contribution, either financial or non-financial, you are called to make. Filling out the pledge card is what is important. On November 20th, we will all present our pledges to God in recognition of the gifts that God has bestowed on us. Please give prayerful consideration to what your response will be in the intervening days. People often lament that their lives are out of balance, with either too much work or studying and too little time. Making a prayerfully inspired pledge is a tangible way that can help realign our lives to reflect what is important to us. Amen.

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