

December 2023

Practice What You Preach _____ Matthew 23:1-12

23Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, 2“The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; 3therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. 4They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. 5They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. 6They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, 7and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. 8But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. 9And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. 10Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. 11The greatest among you will be your servant. 12All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

As a teenager, I amassed a whole list of things that my mother said that I swore I would NEVER say to MY children. You know, things like, "You're not leaving the house in THAT outfit!" or "Wipe that look off your face!" or (now this was never said in my house because my father and I were two peas in a pod and my momma knew better... but some will understand, "Just wait until your father gets home!" At the top of that list was one that reeked of the sort of adult hypocrisy teens love to latch onto. I can't recall the exact occasion, or what teenage behavior had elicited these words, but I can still hear Momma's voice, proclaiming, "Do what I say not what I do!" "Do as I say not as I do???" No teenager--egocentric and idealistic as only teens can be--wants to hear that! All these years later I can still feel my sense of indignation, my outrage at the notion that my mother wanted to hold me to a standard of behavior that she couldn't even manage herself! Of course, what goes around comes around...now I'm not a mother myself but I did raise my little brother and I've heard myself saying some of the very things I vowed never to repeat. And I understand so much better the frustrations my mother must have felt, and not just the frustrations, but also the desires and the hopes she held for the kind of people she wanted her children to become. I know all too well the truth she hit upon when she pronounced that we should do as she said, not as she did: the truth that it's awfully hard to live up to our ideals, to practice what we preach. We hear that truth running through Jesus' tirade against the scribes and Pharisees that is the centerpiece of today's gospel reading. "The scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore do whatever they teach you, but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach," Jesus tells his followers, and then he goes on to enumerate the ways their behavior belies their teaching.

This isn't the first time Jesus has called out the scribes and the Pharisees for hypocrisy; Jesus liked to rag on the scribes and the Pharisees--not because they were inherently evil, or because Jewish law no longer mattered--indeed, Jesus reminded his followers more than once of the importance of the law--no, Jesus singled out the scribes and Pharisees because in all their humanness they provided him such rich fodder by repeatedly falling so very short of the ideals they preached.

I wonder if Jesus were to come back today whether we might afford equally rich fodder for Jesus' critiques. We who are members of churches with rich liturgical traditions can perhaps identify with the Pharisees concern with fringes and phylacteries (boxes containing Hebrew scripture), with titles and respect--I mean have you ever seen a bunch of priests or pastors drooling over a vestment catalog, debating the merits of watered silk versus brocade to set the proper atmosphere for worship? And how many discussions among new clergy have centered on whether we should be addressed as "Father" or "Mother" or "Reverend" or "pastor" or just by our first names in order to have our authority respected? Even those whose traditions fall into the more reformed practices are not immune to such obsessions...preaching gowns and chancel robes and choir vestments, a proper font or baptistery. We're not averse to having our names in the paper either, if we can justify it as good publicity for the church.

No, we're not so different from the scribes and Pharisees.... Of course, the problem actually goes

much deeper than what we wear or what we're called. Phylacteries and fringes, vestments and titles all have their place when kept in perspective. Jesus' concern, then and now, is the way those things get out of perspective, the way our motivations for doing them become distorted so that they become an end in themselves, the way they become substitutes for what we are really about: glorifying God and living as disciples.

If human nature made it hard for the scribes and Pharisees to keep their motives pure, to practice what they preached, we in the 21st century church are perhaps even more disadvantaged. We still have the same human nature, and we're embedded in a culture that values appearances, status, wealth, position, individualism, materialism and consumerism. Coupled with the fact that the role of the church in society is greatly diminished, it's no wonder that our tendency to do things to make ourselves stand out--as individuals and as an institution--can make us forget why we're Christians, can lead us away from the kind of discipleship Jesus is calling us to.

Because discipleship has nothing to do with standing out, with being self-serving, or putting ourselves first; quite the contrary--we, all of us, are called not to be served but to serve others. As we hear in today's reading, Jesus consistently reminded his followers that "the greatest among you will be your servant" and "all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted." So we're caught between what the gospel calls us to and what our culture upholds, and that's where we often find ourselves in the same bind the Pharisees were ensnared in, the bind my mother understood so well when she demanded, "Do as I say not as I do." We believe one thing, we hold it in our hearts, yet our behavior all too often gives lie to that belief.

If you think I am being too hard on you, on all of us who call ourselves Christians, think about what our lives as average churchgoers are like.

We go to church on a Sunday morning and we hear the good news of the gospel; we're so moved by the sermon and the hymns that we put a few extra dollars in the plate for outreach and we vow to drop off some food for the local food pantry. We feel refreshed by our worship, and a bit self-satisfied, if we're completely honest, because, look, we've been to church. We say a prayer as we leave that we might be better disciples. And then we walk out of church, and nine times out of ten, we leave our discipleship behind. We don't leave it behind on purpose, of course. It's just that it's hard for us to connect Jesus saying "Love your neighbor as yourself" with the news of the illegal immigrants who were picked up while harvesting our crops or with the homeless man sitting on the street, hoping to get enough change for a hamburger at McDonalds. It's hard to connect Jesus' command to "turn the other cheek" with Congressional requests for more defense spending and reports of violence around the world. It's hard to heed Jesus' injunction not to "worry about what you shall eat or what you shall drink or what you shall wear" when the economy is going south so quickly. It's hard to live up to our ideals; as Paul succinctly put it in his letter to the Romans, we do those things we hate and we fail to do those things we want to do. We don't practice what we preach.

There's only one answer to this dilemma, one antidote for what ails us. And that answer is God's grace. God's grace for us means that no matter how many times we walk out of church leaving our discipleship behind us, God will give us yet another opportunity to live more fully into it. No matter how often we act in self-serving ways, we will be given more chances to serve others. No matter how badly we fail to live out our discipleship, to practice what we preach, God's love and God's grace are still there for us, still hold us and comfort us and sustain us. We will always have yet one more chance...one more chance to get it right, to embrace Jesus' call to be servants, to see our neighbors at every turn, to see them and to love them, unselfishly, unreservedly. That's what Jesus teaches over and over again--and Jesus never fails to practice what he preaches.