

Message for November 5, 2017

Glennon Heights Mennonite Church

Betsy Headrick McCrae

Scripture passage: Matthew 23:1-12

The greatest among you

Jesus gets pretty caustic in Matthew 23. There's no sweetness and light in what he has to say about the Jewish religious establishment. "They do not practice what they teach. They 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. They do all their deeds to be seen by others." Ouch! Those are harsh words.

Christians over the centuries have used these words to say, rather self-righteously, look how awful Judaism is. We Christians are different. We are better than that. But that's totally missing the point, or perhaps proving the point. Jesus was an observant Jew. He was part of the tradition he so pointedly criticizes. He was speaking from a place of belonging. In saying what he says to the leaders of his own religious tradition, he is asking us all to take a good hard look at ourselves.

So let's take a good hard look at this passage. Jesus is talking to the crowds and the disciples. He starts with a disclaimer. "Do whatever the scribes and Pharisees teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach." Though I am challenging the behavior of the religious authorities, he says, I don't want you to think that I'm questioning the value of the religion itself. Even if the religious leaders aren't good living examples, they teach what is right and good, what has come down over the centuries from God and God-following people. They tell you what God desires and what will be life-giving to you. Don't reject that. Be discerning. Know where your treasure lies. Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater.

This is a challenging teaching. Can we separate the message from the messenger? Are we supposed to do that? Can folks who are obviously corrupt still have good things to say? I think of famous actors, artists, and even theologians who have engaged in sexual harassment. Doesn't their unacceptable, hurtful behavior taint their work beyond redemption? Doesn't the incredibly damaging sexual misconduct of priests and other church leaders negate or at least call into question the teachings of Christianity? Obviously folks need to be held to account. Bad and hurtful behavior must be called out. It is unacceptable. This is what Jesus is doing in Matthew 23. But at the same time, Jesus says, be discerning. Don't let these bad apples ruin what is good. Don't reject that which is precious and life-giving. This calls for soul-searching and prayer, I think. Sometimes it is easier said than done.

So what are these religious leaders doing that is so bad? "They 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." They prescribe rule after rule to regulate daily life – don't eat that, don't go there, don't mix with those folks, behave in this way – with little or no compassion for people for whom following the rules is very difficult. In other words, to them rules are more important than people. This may sound harsh, but my friends, this is something that we deeply understand and accept as necessary. In fact, it is one of our basic cultural assumptions. Rules are more important than people.

Why do I say this? I'm just finished reading a book entitled African Friends and Money Manners by David E. Maranz. It's all about cultural differences between Western folks – Western Europeans, U.S. Americans, Canadians – and African folks. Time after time as I read what this author has to say, I was brought up short. I had almost a visceral

reaction. No! That's not the way things work! My insides rebelled. When that happened, it was invariably because from the African point of view, rules are never more important than people. Even rules about what's mine and what's yours. Rules about paying back loans. Rules about giving more than you can afford to anyone who asks. In every case, it seems, African folks will prioritize relationships over future financial security or what we see as wise money management. For them, good and peaceful relationships lead to true security. I feel challenged by this, and by Jesus' words to the scribes and Pharisees. I am challenged think about where I cling to rules and expectations in a way which makes it difficult or even impossible for others to thrive. Are the rules I live by more important to me than people? What is the role of mercy in my life?

Jesus continues his critique of the religious leaders: "They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long."

Phylacteries are small leather boxes containing portions of scripture which folks strap to their forehead or shoulder while praying. Fringes are the tassels attached to prayer shawls. Both of these are symbols of piety. The bigger or longer they are, the more they are noticed, the more obviously pious the wearer. Jesus continues, "They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi."

The terms rabbi, teacher and instructor in this passage are not professional titles describing what one does for a living. Instead they are honorific titles, symbols of position and power. Rabbi means "my great one." It was used for a variety of respected figures. The term, father, was used for prophets and the patriarchs. It was, and is, a

symbol of patriarchal power. Instructor was a title similar to rabbi. All of these titles were used to convey high position and societal power over others. Folks who claimed these titles were putting themselves on a pedestal and demanding respect.

As I thought about this I thought about how we portray ourselves on social media. On Colorado Public Radio this week they highlighted a story about the high rate of suicide in the Grand Junction area. Young journalists were interviewed about how they had covered deaths by suicide among their fellow high schoolers. One of the things they mentioned was how harmful it can be to see everyone else's "perfect life" on Instagram or Facebook and feel that you are missing out or not measuring up. This is not a phenomenon restricted to teenagers. Many adults are similarly affected. When we present only the ideal, when we make a show of our "piety," our "perfect life," when we publically hold ourselves and our lives up as especially worthy of honor, awe and adulation without acknowledging the darker, more complicated, considerably less-than-perfect side of things, we contribute to a dangerous illusion. We help create an impossible world, a world which leads people to think that for them, death is the only answer.

Don't do this, Jesus says. Don't buy into this. Don't present yourselves as more important or perfect than you are. Don't show off or try to impress. Don't act like you deserve special honor or respect. All this is counterproductive. It doesn't mean anything and it is discouraging and defeating in the long-run. It is not at all what true greatness is about. Then he drops the bombshell: "The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted."

The greatest among you will be your servant. Let's think about this for a while.

Who are the real servants in our society? Who does our dirty work? Very often it is women of color – Hispanic women, African American women, Asian women. They are our home health care providers, our maids in hotels, the ones who provide janitorial services in our office buildings. Of course there are men and white folks who also provide these services, but a comparatively high percentage of these workers are women of color. They are our servants. And, according to Jesus, they are the greatest among us. What would it mean to take this seriously?

Well, to start, we will really see them. And we will find ways to give them honor and respect. We can do this by taking our own Christian story seriously. Our Jesus story starts with a young, brown, poor, female body. We have spiritualized, whitened and idealized Mary, the mother of Jesus. We've done this so that we don't have to pay attention to who she really was and who she represents. God came to us through the female body (which is often degraded and abused) of a poor (which means of little worth) Middle Eastern (dark, foreboding, dangerous) Jew. These things, which we discount, dismiss and often detest, were things that God specifically chose. These things – poor, female, of color – are precious and oh-so-worthy of greatness in God's sight. If that is true, they need to be precious and worthy of honor and respect for us as well. We honor God by honoring those who are precious in God's sight.

“All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.” Sometimes we need to be humbled – we've talked about that – but too often we feel unworthy. In that case, what does it mean to be exalted? I'd like to share with you a story – you might have seen it on the Internet; I got it from my sister – which speaks to this feeling of unworthiness, and of exaltation, of purpose and of meaning

beyond ourselves no matter how flawed we may be.

A water bearer in India had two large pots, each hung on one end of the pole he carried across the back of his neck. One of the pots had a crack in it, and while the other pot was perfect and always delivered a full portion of water at the end of the long walk from the stream, the cracked pot arrived only half full. This went on every day for two years, with the bearer delivering only one and a half pots of water to his master's house.

Of course, the perfect pot was proud of its accomplishment and saw itself as perfectly suited for the purpose for which it was made. But the poor cracked pot was ashamed of its imperfection and miserable that it was able to accomplish only half of what it had been made to do. After two years of what it perceived as bitter failure, it spoke to the water bearer one day by the stream. "I am ashamed of myself and I want to apologize to you."

"Why?" asked the bearer. "What are you ashamed of?"

"For the past two years, I have been able to deliver only half my load because this crack in my side causes water to leak out all the way back to your master's house. Because of my flaws you have to work without getting the full value of your efforts," the pot said.

Out of compassion the water bearer said, "As we return to the master's house, I want you to notice the beautiful flowers along the path." Indeed, as they went up the hill, the old cracked pot took notice of the sun warming the wildflowers on the side of the path. The pot felt cheered. But at the end of the trail, the pot still felt bad because it had leaked out half its load, and again it apologized for its failure.

The bearer said to the pot, “Did you notice that there were flowers only on your side of the path, but not on the other pot’s side? That’s because I knew about your flaw and took advantage of it. I planted flower seeds on your side of the path, and every day while we walk back from the stream, you’ve watered them for me. For two years I have been able to pick these beautiful flowers to decorate my master’s table. If you were not just the way you are, with all your cracks and imperfections, he would not have such beauty to grace his house.”

Well, we’ve covered a lot of ground looking at these 12 verses from Matthew 23. Let’s recap what we’ve learned:

1. Don’t throw the baby out with the bathwater. Don’t let flawed messengers ruin what is precious, life-giving and good. Hold onto that.
2. Rules are never more important than people. Find ways to be compassionate with those for whom the rules are limiting and difficult. Show mercy.
3. Don’t pretend to be more important, more perfect, more worthy of honor than you are. Don’t live in a pretend world. And don’t project a pretend world to others. Instead be honest. Share your real life with all its joys and foibles for in doing so you will encourage others.
4. The greatest among you will be your servant. Take this to heart. Look around and notice who the servants are. They are often female, brown and poor, as was the mother of Jesus. See them with new eyes. Honor them with respect. Aspire to be like them.
5. Even those who are humble, those who feel unworthy, those who are damaged

merchandise will be exalted. God can use you with all your strengths and all your weaknesses to bring beauty and joy to the world.

Sisters and brothers, this is the word of the Lord and it can be trusted. Amen.