

October 30, 2011

Matthew 23:1-12

“Budging the Burden”

Picture this: A dusty itinerant preacher is surrounded by a crowd in a local park. He climbs up on a picnic table and begins to speak:

“Theologians and pastors have insight into Scripture, so pay attention to what they say, and apply it to your life. But don’t copy what they DO, because they don’t practice what they preach. They load people up with “oughts” and “shoulds” that are impossible to carry out, and they don’t lift a finger to help people in their struggle to live right.

They really like to show off. Look at the gleaming white collars and sweeping flowing robes they wear—and have you noticed how expensive the fabric is? What about those sumptuous brocade and embroidered stoles?

These folks like to sit at the head table at banquets, and in seats elevated higher than the congregation in church. They love it when people around town recognize them. They like being called “Reverend Doctor” at lectures.

Don’t let anyone call YOU by fancy titles, because you are all in the same boat, brothers and sisters in one family. Only one person is your teacher. None of you is a BIG DEAL; the BIG ONE is the One Upstairs. The greatest person of all is one who does for others. Whoever willingly cleans up after the dog is headed down the right road. Whoever thinks their hands are too fancy to clean up dog messes has a lot to learn.”

If we heard this dusty preacher, how would we react? My imaginary preacher’s words aren’t exactly the same as what Jesus said in Jerusalem, but I imagine his words hit the crowd with much the same kind of impact.

What is Jesus saying to us—clergy, Christians, the church?

Maybe he’s saying religious leaders shouldn’t distinguish themselves from the laity—by wearing stoles, robes and so on. Or by sitting in seats above the main level of the sanctuary. It’s as if clergy are setting themselves ABOVE others. So maybe they should sit with the people.

But then, the Scripture shows us Jesus wasn't speaking TO the religious leaders, but ABOUT THEM-- to the CROWDS and his DISCIPLES. On top of that, this interpretation has lots of "oughts" and "shoulds" in it, and that was the kind of burden-binding the Pharisees did. Jesus called them on that many times—the way they had lists and lists of rules—they were always saying, "If you want to be righteous- you should do this and that and that and that!"

Could this passage be about hypocrisy? And how we shouldn't pretend to be what we are not? We ought to be humble??

Oops. More "should" and "ought" language. We keep running into this! What is the problem?

The problem comes from the fact that we all want and need acceptance. We are made that way. So when we believe we "should" and "ought" to be and do certain things IN ORDER TO GAIN ACCEPTANCE, which is ESSENTIAL for our survival—our backs bend with the heavy load we carry.

That load becomes PRETENSE. We pretend to be what we think we SHOULD be, but are not. We pretend in order to be accepted.

Several members of my family have been looking for work recently. So, there's been a lot of conversation about interviews—about praying for people to do well in their interviews. We have discussed the fact that we're easily tempted, as we try to put on our best face for an interview, to stretch or exaggerate a little bit about one's experience and abilities. BUT, everyone has recognized the immense danger in that—if you pretend you know and can do things you don't and can't—that will show up pretty quickly once you're on the job!! You have to be honest!! No pretending!!

I am enjoying being a part of the "Jesus in the Gospels" class which meets on Wednesday evenings. Recently I was talking to Pastor Bromleigh about the fact that when people have questions about a particular passage in the Bible, I often cannot answer those specifically. For example, one class member remembered that when Jesus died on the cross, the curtain to the Holy of Holies in the Temple was torn in two. He wondered, is that in Mark's gospel? My reply: "I don't know—let's look!" And we all opened

our Bibles to find out. Another person asked, “What about Luke and Matthew?” Again I said, “Let’s look!”

Friends, it is a little scary for me to share this with all of you. But it would be stupid for me to pretend to be and know what I do not. I’m not a “chapter and verse” Christian- I know much about the Bible and events in it—but I need to consult concordances sometimes to find specific verses and passages. And as the years pass, and my aging brain fails to hold onto a wide variety of things—I need even more to be open and honest about this.

THIS is what I believe Jesus is saying in Matthew’s text for today:

YOU are not Christ. You have only ONE teacher, ONE master, ME!

WE ARE NOT CHRIST. We are neither perfect teachers nor wise masters. WE DON’T HAVE TO BE.

Jesus reminds us: *You have one Father... in heaven.*

WE ARE NOT GOD. We don’t possess ultimate knowledge or power. WE AREN’T EXPECTED TO.

WE ARE BROTHERS AND SISTERS. We share similar hopes, fears, failings and sinfulness. WE HAVE NO NEED TO PRETEND OTHERWISE.

The message is NOT: We SHOULDN’T pretend to be what we’re not.
The message IS: We don’t HAVE TO.

Everything is a gift. Any insight, any wisdom we possess has been given to us. We’re relieved of the burden of pretending to always know and always do the right thing. We no longer carry the burden of thinking we SHOULD have the wisdom to discover answers to every question, solutions to every problem. We give it our best shot. And then lean on God.

Jesus has budged that burden off our shoulders. That burden of pretending.

The good news is ours: God accepts us as we are. God loves our true selves. God helps us be more honest about who we are. And God can help us grow to be more like Christ.

We don't need to pretend, because what we really are is surely good enough: God's own daughters and sons, who bear the image of God. All praise and thanks to God above!

(Text preceding gathering and dedication of Commitment cards for 2012):

This is Reformation Sunday, when we remember what Martin Luther taught: that the church is EVER in need of reformation. The church is filled with the Holy Spirit, but also with US, flawed and fairly consistent sinners. WE need to yield to God, to be shaped by our Lord. The CHURCH needs to do this also.

OUR church is always in need of changing and evolving as God directs us. We are hoping God will create among us a new culture of giving, of generosity here at Baker Memorial, which will permit us to shine with Christ's light in new and faithful ways.

I invite all of you to be a part of undergirding our ministries in 2012, by bringing forward a Commitment/Pledge card this morning. Share your estimate of giving for 2012, as we pray for God to lead us forward as faithful followers of Christ into the coming months and year.

(Mark will play hymns.)