

Mt 23:1-12 – “New Improved Model”

I listened to a sermon recently that was really, really depressing ... and I was reminded of that sermon as I looked at the reading from Matthew's gospel. The sermon that I heard went on and on, but that wasn't necessarily the depressing part – instead it was the totally negative focus of the preacher. It was a sermon based on a reading from Ecclesiastes – you know the famous bit about “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die ...” Apparently it was the season to be really depressed, because most of the sermon – and I mean somewhere in excess of 95% - was a rough paraphrase of “life really sucks, and then you die!” I kept waiting for the hope, and finally did hear one or two quick little references to hope at the end, but the whole experience was a major downer.

I guess how you approach a text has a lot of impact on how your understanding of it develops. For example – and I think that's why this reading from Matthew reminded me of that negative sermon – if you were to approach today's text focused only on the negative (the most common approach, by the way) I think you'd only hear the explicit “do not's” in the text, and miss the whole point of the teaching. If, however, you can hear the implicit “do's” in here and focus on them, you will come away with a much more positive and useful instruction.

To be sure, the message does on the surface appear to be negative, as Jesus points out the undesirable behaviour of the scribes and the Pharisees – the religious leaders of his day. He berates them for their love of place, their love of preferential treatment, their pride and their focus upon making themselves the centre of attention. Even the commands about not calling anyone father or teacher are set as prohibitions that sound clearly as “do not's.” It is readily obvious from these commands that a significant number of the leaders in Jesus' day behaved this way.

It is readily obvious that many religious leaders today still do as well. Not to point fingers, but bopping around the nation or the world in the luxury of one's own top-end executive jet sure seems to me like today's version of what Jesus was speaking against. Could we consider being moderator of a nationally-televised presidential debate be considered a “place of honour at a banquet?” Would railing against lascivious living while living in a luxurious mansion be a modern-day version of “not practicing what they preach?” Can we think of today's examples of “laying heavy burdens” on the weak, the poor, the ill? I think we can, because people and human nature haven't changed very much in all the years since Jesus offered this teaching to the assembled crowds and disciples. Unfortunately, over-humility has rarely if ever been a significant problem in the church. The pendulum has almost always swung the other direction, towards the problems inherent in an exaggerated self-importance.

This is almost a universal characteristic of humanity, but it seems to erupt most strongly – and most damagingly – in local governing groups, for example strata councils and churches. I constantly thank God that here at Central we don't tend to suffer from this kind of problem, but I'm sure most or all of us here can remember a time or a place where we experienced it. It's easy enough to target clergy in this regard, because clergy are at least as susceptible as anyone if not more so to fall prey to the problem of exaggerated self-importance – to love the best seats at banquets, to eat up the adoring respect in public places, to don the fancy robes and strut like peacocks. There's even an emerging trend in our own denomination these days for a kind of reverse version of this. There is a growing number of our clergy who insist on being called “Pastor X”, refuse to wear any clerical clothing, and pretend to be “just one of the sheep.” It's interesting to note how many of these who profess humbleness often do so with an “I'm a more humble servant than you” kind of pride, and secretly love the adoring affirmation of their

humbleness. It's also interesting to note how many of them are anything but humble when it comes to giving orders or directing how things will happen ... the term 'bully' comes to mind.

But clergy are not the only culprits – I think many if not all of us can think of lay people – and even elders - from other times and places who considered themselves the 'real' strength and power of the congregation. Now in one sense they're right because all of the people together as a part of the body of Christ are, along with the Holy Spirit, the real strength and power of a congregation. But you know the kind of person I mean – the person who is convinced that they alone are holding the congregation together – with or without, and usually without – the help of God. The most dangerous of these people that I have encountered in my past are the ones who claim, "this is MY congregation, and I'll be darned if I will let it be changed!" Now I tend to respond enthusiastically to direct threats, and to this kind of challenge my response tends to be, "you'll be darned if you don't!" I've seen congregations run into the ground, completely destroyed, by that kind of arrogant, self-exalting prideful stubbornness on both sides of the lay/clergy boundary.

The sad part is that all of this self-importance represents a drift away from what Jesus called his church to do, and to be. The joyful part about Jesus' message, which so many fail to hear or even choose not to hear, is a new and improved model of how we are to live out our faith. True, he does use the religious leaders of his own day – the scribes and the Pharisees – as bad examples, but we shouldn't rush into rejoicing saying "I'm glad I'm not like them". The point of Jesus' teaching is not to be negative, to carp against these leaders, not merely to recite their flaws, but to give both his followers and those who would lead them a whole new and improved model of how to behave in living out our faith. "Do as they say, not as they do", he tells them, and tells us, reaffirming the legitimacy of the leaders on the one hand but condemning their actions on the other.

If we are not to do what such august leaders do, what then is it that Jesus wants his followers, and the church leaders, and us to do? I think this is the positive and joyful part of this message, because it provides us some affirmation in our faith, some more evidence of God's grace at work. Every time we can demonstrate that we "practice what we preach" – especially if we are preaching the gospel message of love and healing and reconciliation and feeding the hungry and clothing the naked and comforting the lonely – we are demonstrating that we have heard the positive side of this teaching. Every time we display the love of God at work in us by loving our neighbour as ourselves we are showing that we not only have heard what Jesus was really saying but also have been able to take it to heart. Jesus is not calling for us to beat ourselves up, or to adopt a false humility, but to seek integrity in our faith, to strive for a perfect match between what we profess and what we do.

What then about that instruction not to call anyone on earth 'father'? If we all were to follow that, wouldn't it bring chaos into normal family life? Is that what Jesus really meant to imply? Notice that there are two similar injunctions that don't get nearly the same attention: teacher, and master. The restrictions here in the text, if followed to the "n'th" degree would allow no titles. As I mentioned, some parts of the church have gone that route, although there is a kind of inverted pride and love of recognition that shows up even in humble terms like 'Brother', or even 'Pastor'. The real issue here, though, is not in titles, nor even in clothing, but in a true humility that reflects upon and lives out a thankfulness for the gift of grace from God in Christ Jesus.

Another positive side to Jesus' instruction? "Help others instead of loading them down with heavy burdens." We wish the rule-makers would take this one to heart more often, but I'm

sure Jesus also wishes we would take it to heart ourselves. We are masters at putting subtle rules into effect, aren't we? Be quiet. Be holy. Pay attention to me. We all do it; none of us are immune. Be more spiritual. Be more prayerful. Dress more appropriately. Be respectful. These are just some of the burdens we load upon people. Jesus calls us not only to refrain from placing heavy burdens on people but also to help them with the ones they have.

Yet another part of the new improved model? Do your good deeds quietly, invisibly and behind the scenes, instead of in such a way that they get noticed.

Check your phylacteries and fringes to see if they need trimming. (Phylacteries are those little boxes filled with scripture and strapped to the forehead, in adherence to "write these words upon your forehead". Fringes are those tangly bits on the ends of the prayer shawls.) Jesus of course was giving a word of caution to any who might like to make sure that everyone notices how well / how prayerfully / how spiritually / how energetically / how humbly they are worshipping. (Can I insert a 'commercial' here about the use of the word "just" in prayers that drives me crazy? You know, "Lord, we just ask ...", as though we didn't want to bother God. It's OK to bother God with our prayers. We need to pray boldly, secure in our faith that God wants to hear from us, even wants to grant our requests.)

Choose a seat somewhere other than at the head table means be humble, be able and willing to sit anywhere, with anyone. (Note – this one does NOT apply to parking spaces, especially mine!)

Remember that we are all sisters and brothers – all equals in the faith. It's not so much that we don't need any leaders, but that those who would lead must recognize that the mark of a true leader is that people want to follow. That quality of leadership can neither be bought nor replaced with impressive titles or fancy robes.

Lest any of us think that these instructions do not apply to us, Jesus promises that it will all get sorted out eventually. To both those who abuse their positions and to those who suffer under such abuse, Jesus promises a leveling and a justice: the self-exalted will be humbled, and the humble will be exalted.

We all recognize these are good instructions; we even all nod in agreement; we mostly put them into practice. What more can we do? Well, more of the same. Hear not just the examples and the rules but hear also the call to foster an attitude of caring, of accepting, of recognizing the legitimacy of others. Understand that we are all in this lifeboat together, and that it is only by the grace of God that we survive, not by our own cleverness or faithfulness or purity or importance. Let that understanding govern all interactions with all other people both in and out of the church. Show by our love, our tolerance, our acceptance that we know our place - that we know our place is not on some pillar of righteousness but at the feet of our one and only Teacher and Lord and Master Jesus Christ – and show by our humble service to others that there is plenty of room for them there also, and they are at least as welcome as we are.