

“Be Real, Not Real Religious” – Mat 7:21-29 – 2nd after Pentecost – May 29, 2005

“Not everyone who calls me, “Lord, Lord” will enter the kingdom of heaven...” Wow! Them’s fightin’ words, eh?! Whatever could have caused Jesus to make such a challenging, disturbing even, declaration? Well, there was plenty that happened to him that provoked this statement, and plenty that still does. We’ll take a look at some of that, but before we do, let’s refresh our memory about the occasion upon which Jesus spoke these words.

These words are the concluding remarks in the body of teaching in Matthew’s gospel that has become known as “The Sermon on the Mount”, a sermon not in the format with which we’re familiar, but more of a concentrated collection of Jesus’ instructions to his disciples, to his followers. The words and instruction that Jesus had for his followers were astounding to those who heard him then, and are still astounding for those who hear them today. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”, he begins, launching a series of sayings that challenged and contradicted both the conventional wisdom of the day and the firmly-held beliefs of the pious. The expected were included: “blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart”, those everyone can understand. But more confusing from Jesus were, “blessed are the unlikely: those who mourn, the meek, the persecuted, the poor in spirit”, that was a new revelation.

And Jesus went on to show that his opening remarks were no accident. “You have heard it said, ... but I say to you ...”, he repeats over and over, emphasizing the difference between what the conventional religious wisdom was, and what was really desired by God. “You have heard it said, an eye for an eye, ... but I say to you, turn the other cheek”, is but one example. The conventional wisdom of “love your neighbour, hate your enemy” is replaced with “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged”, complete with the familiar example of dealing with the speck in the neighbour’s eye while ignoring the 2x4 in your own. And in case his listeners might get the mistaken idea that somehow all of this was totally new, and that they were now free to head off in whatever direction they felt the wind blowing them, Jesus intersperses his instructions with reminders that the law and the prophets are still valid. “Don’t think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets”, he proclaims. “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees you will never see the kingdom of heaven”, he promises.

“How can this be? How can we out-righteous the righteous?”, his listeners must have been asking, because the very same questions are still being asked today. Unfortunately, too often the answer to those questions is to become like the Scribes and Pharisees, only more so. I say ‘unfortunately’ because doing so misses the rest of what Jesus had to say, and he had much to say about not acting like Scribes and Pharisees. For example, “do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others ... but whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret ...” Those who listened to Jesus, and who thought that the epitome of looking religious was to look sour and unhappy, must have been extremely uncomfortable to hear him say, “and when you fast, don’t look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting.”

Jesus’ declarations, by his own account, were not to overthrow or to throw away the law and the prophets, but to return to living the law as they had been called to so do by the prophets who preceded him. Jesus’ message was one not of replacing the law, but to return to a clear understanding of what God’s intent behind the law. The most notable examples of that clear re-understanding include his declaration elsewhere, “I give you a new commandment, to love God with all that you are, and to love each other as God has loved you”, and his assertion here, “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.”, the familiar “Golden Rule”.

And finally, the Sermon on the Mount concludes with the two admonitions from Jesus that we read. I think once we see those two cautions set against the rest of what Jesus said they begin to make some sense. To those who act righteous enough to feel they could challenge even Jesus himself because of their righteous deeds and mighty works in his name, Jesus offers a stern rebuke. “Get away from me you evildoers!”, he exclaims. The words, quoted from Psalm 6:8, literally mean “depart from me, you lawless ones ...” Recognizing Jesus’ emphasis upon the law as being God’s expression of how we are to treat others with love, kindness, compassion, acceptance and respect, it becomes a whole lot clearer just why Jesus calls them ‘lawless’. Indeed, later in Matthew’s gospel we will hear Jesus become much more explicit about this same theme with his “woe to you, scribes and Pharisees” sayings.

“Not everyone who calls me, ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of my Father in heaven.”, Jesus declared. What is that will? To heed his prophets, and return to worshipping God. To heed his prophets, and to walk humbly, and to love justice. To heed his prophets, and to obey his law. To heed God’s Son, and to obey his law of compassion, mercy, non-judgment, acceptance, being truthful, providing loving support instead of crushing burdens of rules. In other words, being real, not real religious.

And that is affirmed by the second and concluding caution from Jesus, a reminder that faith is not merely about hearing his words and nodding in sage approval, but the words having no impact on our actions. With his declaration, “Not everyone ... but only those who do the will of my Father ...”, Jesus calls us to more than just belief; to more even than zealous belief; to more even than zealous belief augmented by zealous but misguided action. Jesus calls us to be touched by his words, to be so affected by them that we are compelled to be changed by them, and to do something about it, to act out the will of God, to the glory of God.

Graham Standish, in his book “Becoming a Blessed Church”, cites the second part of Jesus’ conclusion, the example of building a house on a solid foundation as being “one of the most subtly powerful parables in the Gospels”, and relates it to building the foundation for a congregation. He notes that both traditional and modern churches have foundation problems, having built their congregations on either social tradition or splashy enthusiasm as examples. His response to this parable of building on a solid foundation is to see faith and trust as the elements necessary to lay a proper foundation. Faith and trust in God, and faith and trust in each other, provide a foundation that enables the whole church to connect with God, while also empowering us to grow into a transforming faith.

Milfred Minatrea, from whom I borrowed the title for this sermon, elaborates on what I believe is an essential component of that foundational faith and trust, namely ‘authenticity’. In his book, “Shaped by God’s Heart”, he examines authenticity from three perspectives: authenticity in faith, authenticity with each other, and acting authentically in the world. Regarding authenticity in faith, Minatrea claims that “Spirituality is much more than religious practices”, noting that many see the church to be a ‘head trip’ that never touches the heart, and points out how different that is from the way Christianity is portrayed in scripture, where the Greek word ‘*splanchna*’ [literally, ‘guts’] is used to illustrate how the faith should touch us deeply. ‘Gutsy Faith’, now that would make a great sermon title, too! The kind of faith in which all of us take discipleship seriously, every day of the week. I don’t recall ever reading in scripture, “and the disciples gathered around Jesus on the Sabbath, as was their custom”. As Minatrea puts it, “Missional churches are captivated by the mystery of faith, the wonder of being in God’s presence, and the joy of serving in His Kingdom. Their God is real, and their faith is real. Not a bunch of religious rules to follow, this faith relates people with their Creator

through His Son ... More than a system of religious rules, missional discipleship is a life-changing relationship, a Body in love with God.”

The second point Minatrea makes is that Missional churches are authentic with one another, noting the unselfish love exhibited by first-century Christians offering hospitality to each other. Beginning in those early days, and continuing to today, Christians formed and form a counterculture community, striving together to hear and to live out God’s desires for us. In such a loving community that seeks change, there is always the risk of mistakes and errors, but there is always room for grace and forgiveness. When we are able to be authentic with one another, mistakes do not get ignored, they do not get swept under the carpet; but neither do mistakes cause such grief and reaction that we become paralyzed, unwilling to take any risks. Just as paralysis in the human body results in eventual death, so too does paralysis in the Body of Christ. Real relationships imply risk, and so too does real faith.

Stultifying rules often lead to unreal faith, but that does not mean that we should abandon any guidelines – indeed recall that Jesus’ accusation was against the ‘lawless’. If we search scripture we can find many appropriate commands that fit well within the law of Jesus’ ultimate commandment. One such set that summarizes it nicely is from Antioch Community Church:

- love one another
- yield to others, serving their interests: be devoted, humble, submit, serve
- spend time with one another: greet, offer hospitality, have fellowship
- allow others to be imperfect – don’t become irritated with them: be patient, accept, bear with, be at peace, wait for, forgive
- build one another up with words – be helpful to one another: build up, speak truth, admonish, confess
- have a gentle heart toward others in difficulty: care for, comfort, be kind, have compassion
- be in unity with one another: same mind, members

Some of that may not be totally easy – I’m sure all of us can think of times when we have had to work a little harder (even a lot harder!) to practice such an authentic faith within our own church family. But the really challenging part comes in trying to live and act authentically in the world. It is not enough to be nice to one another inside the church. Understanding that Jesus came not to be served, but to serve, we understand also that we are called to imitate Him, and to likewise serve. The real test comes not when we are well-behaved here in worship, it comes through the week when we are dispersed throughout the community, at school, at work, on the golf course, wherever. These are the real moments when people will be evaluating our faith, testing for phoniness or hypocrisy, probing to see if there is any depth of passion and compassion beneath or if we are merely covered with a veneer of religiosity. The world is always watching, hoping that we are real, not merely real religious, for in that authenticity, that being real, we proclaim and they can see the reality of God’s love in Christ Jesus, our Lord, and begin to believe as we do that the love is real, and really for them.