

Mt 23:1-12 – “Not For Show”

Well, I have to admit to you that this little reading from Matthew’s gospel really is a challenging text to preach upon. Most of that challenge arises from the apparent simplicity of the text – once you’ve repeated the message, that appears to be it. The crowds have been gathered in for this great teaching section, and it seems that the cautions are being directed toward those crowds, for the gist of the message appears to be “avoid imitating the hypocrisy of your religious leaders” – not bad advice in any age. And yet the majority of the words of warning from Jesus are clearly for his disciples – the religious leaders-to-be. Throw in a couple more really confusing instructions like “call no one your father on earth” and the average preacher begins to tear her or his hair at what to say to people in the pews that won’t cause them any more confusion than usual.

Let’s try to chew away at these items one-by-one, in the hope that we will come away with a deeper understanding. First, the issue of the crowds. Note that this is part of Matthew’s contribution as he narrates the story. Jesus has just finished the great controversies with the religious poobahs, and it seems natural enough that crowds would have gathered, most likely hoping as crowds do to see something gory at a car crash, or at least to see this controversial Jesus either fall afoul of the authorities, or even better to see him get away with taking pot-shots at those authorities. And plenty more pot-shots will soon follow, with the famous “woe to you, scribes and Pharisees” section. But for now, we are entering into a major collection of teachings, the last such collection in Matthew’s gospel, and the ever-present crowds around Jesus were appropriately included as an audience for that teaching.

But even with the crowds listening in, it still becomes clear fairly quickly that this particular set of instructions and warnings are targeted by Jesus at his disciples, not at the crowd. The instructions and warnings here are appropriate to leaders, especially those who would be leaders in the church - and the disciples would very soon become leaders of the fledgling church, following the traumatic events of Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension into heaven.

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 meant? There have been, to be sure, various groups and sects over the years who have taken this command literally, using any other word but ‘father’ to refer to the male parent – seemingly missing the point that if one is to be truly literal, only the word for ‘father’ in Aramaic would be a problem, so Greeks, Romans, English and Korean speakers should be OK using their native word for ‘father’. 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 nth degree would allow no titles, and 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 issue 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.

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 neighbourhood councils and churches. I constantly thank God that here at Central –

for the moment, at least, and I also pray it will continue – we aren't suffering from this kind of problem, but I'm sure all of us here can remember a time or a place where we experienced it. Sure, it's easy to target clergy, 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. I suspect any clergy person who denies enjoying the attention, because many of those clergy who shun the robes, 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.

But clergy are not the only culprits – I think many if not all of us can remember lay people – and even elders - from other times and places who considered themselves the 'real' strength and power of the congregation – and in one sense that's true 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 are the ones who claim, "this is MY congregation, and I'll be damned if I will let it be changed!" Naturally enough, my response tends to be, "you'll be damned 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. Jesus' message, which so many fail to hear or even choose not to hear, is clearly against arrogance, against self-exaltation. 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". His point is not to carp against these leaders, not merely to recite their flaws, but to give both his followers and those who would lead them instructions as to what to do by way of contrast. "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 they 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? How do we learn our place? I have to be pretty careful here, because for the most part you faithful saints here at Central do hear and implement his call to humble service. My comments here are not at all a rant against your behaviour, but a reaffirmation of all that you do right. None of us, though, are so perfect that we don't have room for growth, learning and improvement, so perhaps you might even recognize some areas that need attention or tuning. Jesus is pretty specific in his instructions. "Practice what you preach", he tells us. Now that's a tough one, especially when it comes to 'loving your neighbour', especially the stupid neighbour who just cut you off in traffic, but still that command makes sense. His first call is for integrity, for a perfect match between what we say and what we do. That integrity is absolutely essential for developing healthy attitudes, removing and resisting corrosions caused by denial and self-focus.

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. Don't use 'damned' in a sermon. Dress more appropriately. Be joyful. Be respectful. Jesus calls us both to refrain from placing heavy burdens on people and to help them with the ones they have.

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, not literally, but be humble, be able and willing to sit anywhere, with anyone. (Note – this one does NOT apply to parking spaces!)

Remember that we are all brothers and sisters – all equals in the faith. It's not so much that we don't need any leaders, but that those who would lead must do so from within, not from above.

And in case any of us think that we are not subject to these instructions, Jesus promises that it will all get sorted out eventually. To 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. 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.