Practicing What We Preach

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Matthew 23:1-12

The House of Hope Presbyterian Church

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Saint Paul, Minnesota

The 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time

Prayer: In the familiar splendor of this place and in the quietness of these moments O God, startle us by your presence. Silence in us any voice but your own, that in hearing your word we may see and know Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Hypocrisy is so easy to spot, isn’t it? Fewer things make us more incensed than a blatant phony. In case you haven’t noticed, there’s an election coming up this Tuesday, and political campaigns thrive on pointing out the hypocrisy of their opponents. For one more day we’ll have to listen to the television ads with the ominous music in the background and the sinister sounding announcers saying, “He said one thing but did another. He claimed to be this kind of person but his voting record tells another story.”

Of course one cannot read a text like this, on this weekend of all weekends, and not wonder about all the promises that have been made and all the speeches given. And all the pledges that will undoubtedly fall short.

In Matthew’s version of Christ’s life, Jesus is pretty hard on the scribes and the Pharisees. And here, his words seem particularly heated and directed. Jesus says of the leaders of the religion, that they lay burdens on the shoulders of others and don’t lift a finger to help. They do all their deeds in order to be seen and recognized by others. They love occupying the seats of honor and the public notoriety that their religious offices afford them. And perhaps worst of all, they do not practice what they preach—they’re phonies.

In Texas they say of such folks, “Tall hat no cattle.”

According to Matthew, Jesus had a hard time with the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. With their sense of religious superiority and yet their shallow observance, as well as with their hardened focus on the law. They were intent on enforcing the 613 laws or religious rules and regulations that faithful people had to live under. And you knew who the Pharisees were because of the way they dressed—from the uniform that set them apart.

They wore phylacteries, which were little leather boxes with words of scripture on them that the Pharisees literally strapped to their foreheads with leather bands. We refer to those who wear their emotions or their religion on their sleeves, well the Pharisees wore their religion on their foreheads for all to see.

And so if, according to Samuel Johnson, patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel, then a showy, religious pietism on the part of anyone in order to please God or impress or condemn others, is an affront to the true meaning of faithfulness, according to Jesus.
So Jesus tells the crowd and his disciples to listen to their teachings which come from Moses—in other words do what they say you should do, but don’t do as they do, for they don’t practice what they teach. They are more interested in the letter of the law than they are its spirit. They are interested only in the bottom line, not those in line at the bottom. If you’re already hurting or burdened, here, have some additional burdens in terms of your exposed failure to live up to God’s expectations of you.

Jesus in fact says that we have one teacher and that we are all students and that apparently, we never cease to be students. We are life-long learners and everyone knows that learners make mistakes, which is a wonderfully gracious way of understanding the journey of faith.

And so I thought about that and about how this text might speak to us given where we are in our national life on the eve of this seemingly never ending and yet historic election. If Jesus was being critical of the Pharisees for viewing their offices as a sense of entitlement and privilege, and he was, then might some of those lessons apply to leadership of the country? Whoever wins the presidential election on Tuesday, occupying the office won’t be enough. Holding the title Commander and Chief will mean very little unless the one sworn in on January 20 sets a bold direction and actually leads which, by the way, is different from commanding.

So I thought about all of this in terms of our national life together, but also in terms of our life together as a community of faith—as The House of Hope. Each year in the fall, we set aside a particular Sunday and call it Commitment Sunday. It is a day when we formally and intentionally make our annual financial commitments to the church. We send out information and pledge cards and ask you to pray about what God would have you do financially, and then you are invited to physically walk your completed pledge down to the front and place it in a basket, as an act of worship and as a sign of your commitment. This is a day of practicing what we preach.

Of writing it down and sealing it up and bringing it forward.

Now, lest anyone get ahead of me or themselves by questioning the public presentation of pledge cards in worship as somehow similar to the criticism Jesus had with the Pharisees for drawing attention to themselves, these are not the same things. The amount you pledge or give to the church is between you and God. We don’t sell pews to the highest bidder nor do we produce an annual report listing the individual giving amounts.

Our coming forward with pledge cards in hand is a celebration and sign of our commitment to the church, not an occasion for an elite few to stand out and receive special recognition. Which is as it should be.

Because it’s easy to talk about how much we love the church. It’s easy to talk about how much this church means to you and to perhaps revel in how much family history some of you have in this place—your deep roots. It’s quite another thing for you to sacrifice something for this church. To give lavishly and generously out of your deep sense of
gratitude to God for those roots, and to show your gratitude to this institution and on behalf of the people here who have helped shape your life over the years—it’s another things altogether to make the church a high priority in your life, through your commitment, your devotion, your time, your talents, and your treasure. That’s what this day we call Commitment Sunday is all about.

If you read this text from Matthew, there are several things going on in there. Jesus is exposing hypocrisy—those who say one thing and do another. But he’s also issuing a warning about false teachers. And when he says that there is one teacher and that we are all students, it’s a wonderful reminder that we are all, each of us, on a constant journey of faith. That we are to be always learning, always growing and always being challenged to meet God at the intersection of faith and life. To encounter the living God in those places we think would be the last places we could expect to experience God’s presence.

Maybe it’s in a church youth room turned into an overnight shelter for homeless families. Maybe it’s along a muddy road in a poor, rural South African village. Or maybe it’s in your classroom at school. And when you really stop to think about it—really think about it, maybe for you, the place where you encounter God time and time again is right here, in this place we love called The House of Hope.

Maybe God sneaks up on you here in a phrase sung or a word prayed. Maybe it’s in a hand shaken or an embrace exchanged, and in a knowing glance of concern and support coming in your direction from across a crowded room. As life long learners on a journey of faith, it is a fundamental Presbyterian belief that we are better and stronger together, as a group, than we are when left alone. That together we can support one another, encourage one another, pray for one another, and stand with and buoy those in our midst who can barely stand by themselves under the weight of their burden.

And while it happens for each of us at different times and in different ways and for different reasons, this church is about striving to be the place that enables you to experience nothing less than the presence of God in your life. To try and help you make sense of your life and of the world and therefore, of your place, as a child of God, in this world that God loves so much.

In a few moments, and as an act of our worship, we will have an opportunity to express our gratitude to God for what God has done in our lives. And for what God will continue to do through our life of faith as it’s expressed, nurtured and challenged in this House of Hope. Call it giving back. Call it expressing your gratitude. I like to think of it as practicing what we preach.

Amen.