

On Practicing What We Preach Matthew 23:1-12

In this morning's Gospel lesson Jesus reminds the crowds that "The teachers of the law (scribes) and Pharisees sit in Moses' seat" (23:2); meaning that, they follow in the line of Moses, serving as teachers with authority...But their authority is limited, for these religious leaders do not heed their own instructions. Jesus continues, "So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach" (v.3).

Throughout our history, at our best, Brethren have stressed that words of faith alone are not enough, that following Jesus is so much more than giving voice to a prescribed set of beliefs. Discipleship involves embracing a whole new way of living, seeking to embody the spirit and the teachings of Jesus in all we say and all we do.

Surely, this is why Jesus minces few words when urging the people of his day not to follow the example of the scribes and Pharisees. Not only did they not practice what they preach, they proclaimed a law that had become burdensome rather than freeing...weighing people down rather than setting them free to love and serve others.

Many of the religious leaders of Jesus' day missed the heart of the law, which is to love God wholeheartedly, and to love one's neighbors as oneself. The life of faith is to be lived out in the midst of a loving community of people who are seeking together to become more than they presently are...a community of people who grapple with what it means to do justice, love tenderly, and walk humbly with God...a people who challenge and encourage one another to go the extra mile in relationships...to love one's enemies and seek reconciliation in the midst of human conflict...to strive to embody those things that make for peace...to celebrate the wonder of God's creation all around us...to endeavor to give thanks for God's gracious love in all we say and all we do. The life of faith involves putting on a whole new way of living.

Back in the fourth and fifth centuries, the “desert Christians” (or the beginnings of monasticism), were seekers of faith that became convinced the church had lost its way. And so, they withdrew to the desert, hoping to connect anew with God. Other seekers would approach these desert fathers and mothers, yearning to receive from them kernels of spiritual truth. One story has it that a would-be disciple approached one of the desert fathers, asking, “Holy One, is there life after death?” The spiritual guide responded, “Ah, that is an interesting question. But it is not the greatest of spiritual questions.” When pressed further, the desert father added, “The greatest of spiritual questions is: Is there life before death?”

The early Brethren put a great deal of stock in the letter of James, precisely because the writer challenges us to put our faith into practice - to consider the shape of life before death. The writer prods us to be “doers of the word,” “not merely hearers” (James 1:22), and reminds us that faith without works is dead (2:17, 26). It is a call that our life is to be the hands and feet of Christ’s love.

Since the days of the Reformation, however, much of the church has given far less attention to James than have the Brethren...no doubt in large part because of Martin Luther, the great leader of the Reformation, and his belief that the message of James contradicted the apostle Paul’s proclamation that we are saved by faith through God’s grace (Eph 2: 8-9). Luther found it troubling that James would assert that faith without works is dead. Luther felt so strongly about this that he recommended deleting James from the New Testament, labeling it as an “epistle full of straw” that should be burned.

In contrast, Brethren have seen the letter of James as a valuable record of how the early church sought to apply the words of Jesus in their daily lives and relationships. You may remember the account of Alexander Mack, founder of the Brethren, being asked early on, “How shall the Brethren be known?” Mack’s answer: “By the manner of their living.” By a

willingness to practice what we preach; by the intention to serve those in greatest need; by a willingness to “wash feet”; by a passion for peace and right living among all peoples; by a hungering and a thirsting for the coming of God’s kingdom in all its fullness - in all these ways we Brethren, at our best, may be recognized.

Salvation and new life do indeed come to us as a gift - a gift we cannot earn, a gift we seldom deserve. As the hymn, “Come, thou fount of every blessing,” puts it, “O, to grace how great a debtor daily I’m constrained to be!” But our hearts and lives are changed as we receive this remarkable gift. Our calling is to spend our time, not anticipating a pie-in-the-sky future, but rather beginning here and now to experience a new quality in our living. It is a call to put our faith into action, to practice what we preach. And along the way, we begin to understand what Jesus had in mind when asserting, “The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted” (Matthew 23:11-12).

Sisters and brothers, this is our mission - to humbly embrace the call to be servants one of another, to practice what we preach, to become the kind of community in which each is treated with extraordinary respect and gracious love, to reflect Christ’s spirit of compassion, peace, and self-giving love. Amen.