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“Practicing What We Preach”
Matthew 23: 1-12
by Rev. Meghan Davis
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Yikes. I’m not gonna lie, I was not thrilled to see this passage for today. To make matters worse, I came up with the title for the sermon “Practicing What We Preach” before really knowing what my sermon would be about and when I really got to work on the sermon I realized that I might have painted myself into a corner. Actually, Jesus does most of the painting but perhaps I finished off any semblance of an escape route. What wisdom could I possibly share on “practicing what we preach” ? It’s something I struggle with as much as anyone. To pretend otherwise would put me in league with the very people Jesus was talking about.

After chapters of being tested by the religious authorities, Jesus seems to have had enough and really lets them know what he thinks. And it’s not pretty. He essentially calls them hypocritical, full of false pride, and more interested in their own glory than God’s while undermining their authority by saying that no one should be called teacher or instructor or Father because there is only one teacher, instructor and only one Father. It’s a difficult text. Let’s begin with some important history.

This is one of those texts that has been misused throughout the centuries to promote anti-Semitic ideas that Jesus was somehow speaking against “the Jews.” Of course, being a devout Jew, that would be rather strange. We read the Bible as Christian looking in from the outside at the First Century Jewish system. But Jesus was not a Christian criticizing the Jewish authorities from the outside; he was a Jew criticizing from within. In Jesus’ time there were four main groups of Judaism. There were the Pharisees who placed a special emphasis on the interpretation and adaptation of Mosaic Law to all areas of life. Another group familiar to readers of the gospels were the Sadducees who were closely associated with activities at the temple in Jerusalem. Many of Jesus’ contemporaries considered the Sadducees a bit too cozy with the Roman occupiers. The Essenes are referred to less often in the scriptures. They were an austere desert community who viewed all other Jews as having deviated from the authentic faith of Israel. And finally the Zealots who aimed at throwing off the Roman yoke by military means.

While these four groups were active in Jesus’ time, by the time the Gospel of Matthew was written, only the Pharisees remained. The other groups disappeared after the failed Jewish revolt in the year 70 CE which brought about the destruction of the temple. The Gospel of Matthew was written for a community, a small Jewish sect which found itself alienated by and up against the Pharisees, which probably has a lot to do with

why they get such a bad wrap in Matthew’s gospel.¹ But even so, this is still a conflict between two factions of the same religion, not two separate religions.

Two of the primary points Jesus makes in today’s text are about hypocrisy and pride. Jesus says, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad [the leather cases worn on the arm and forehead to keep the *Shema* bound to head and arm as commanded in Mosaic law] and their fringes long. [The fringes are symbolic of being bound to the law of God.] They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi.” Jesus considers the religious authorities hypocrites, but it’s interesting to note that Jesus doesn’t *disagree* with what the Pharisees teach—he tells his disciples to do as the scribes and Pharisees teach them—their teaching is correct, it’s what they *do* that Jesus finds problematic. They don’t follow their own teachings. Jesus has a problem with their failure to do as they say.

Additionally, Jesus says that they “lay heavy burdens” on the Jewish people over whom they have authority, burdens they are not willing to carry themselves. And then the pious deeds they do perform, Jesus says they do just so other people will be impressed by them and give them honor. Jesus accuses them of loving glory for themselves. In this passage, Jesus warns his followers against two forms of hypocrisy: saying one thing while doing another and doing the right thing for the wrong reasons.

It would be easy to stand up here and preach about those terrible, hypocritical Pharisees. It might even be fun to point fingers at hypocrites—specific people or maybe groups of people—in our society and in the world. But that would be falling into the very kind of trap that Jesus was warning against. And it’s so easy to do. After all, “It was not Judaism that provoked this sort of hypocrisy and pride, but human nature.”²

Which brings us to the second main theme, closely connected to the hypocrisy: pride. Augustine, the Fourth Century theologian whose writings greatly influenced the Reformers, especially Martin Luther, wrote: “Pride is a perverted imitation of God. For pride hates a fellowship of equality under God, and seeks to impose its own dominion on fellow men, in the place of God’s rule.”³ Of course, it is pride that led the Pharisees to believe they were too important to follow the teaching they expected everyone else to follow. Pride motivated their actions seeking glory for themselves and not for God. But, as one pastor has noted, “The true measure of faithfulness is found not in the words one speaks or the doctrines one accepts but in the orientation of one’s heart.”⁴ And I would add, the actions we take in service of God and neighbor.

¹ Patrick Gray, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 4. ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 261-3.

² Timothy Beach-Verhey, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 4. ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 262.

³ Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), 868-69.

⁴ Timothy Beach-Verhey, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 4. ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 262.

This passage isn't about finding the hypocrites in our midst and shining a spotlight on them. It's about discipleship. Or, perhaps more to the point, we know who the hypocrites are for they are us. Seeking to overcome our own hypocrisy and pride is an important aspect of discipleship.

Jim Melchiorre, a journalist, video producer and teacher of English as a Second Language tells this story of his own struggle with hypocrisy and pride⁵:

Years ago, I heard someone draw a distinction between the words *humbled* and *humiliated*. The speaker noted that being humiliated is always a hurtful experience to which we should never be subjected. Being humbled, though uncomfortable, is an experience that can be good for us.

I live in New York City. One chilly winter day on the Upper West Side..., I passed a man who asked me for money for food. We New Yorkers often encounter people on the street who are homeless or otherwise marginalized and who ask for assistance. I try to carry snacks in my backpack to offer to those who ask.

But that day I was in a hurry to get to my son's basketball game and simply wasn't in the mood. When I was fifteen feet past him, the man shouted, "You could at least look at me!" What a moment of truth-telling. I had truly exalted myself, proclaiming through my actions that my schedule was so important that I could pretend I didn't see or hear him, as though he didn't exist. I stopped, apologized, and gave him a couple of dollars. The incident humbled me, made me quite uncomfortable, and may have been the most important blessing of that day.

With only the slightest jogging of my memory, I could recall a half-dozen other times in recent months when my actions fell short of the standard of authentic Christian discipleship I claim, instances when I exalted my own needs or simply my convenience above all other considerations of that moment. Perhaps you could acknowledge the same.

Truth-telling can set us free but not before sometimes humbling us, forcing us to examine the authenticity of our discipleship and recommit to the path of following Jesus.

Today we celebrate Reformation Sunday. Back in October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses—his 95 arguments against the religious authorities—on the door of the church at Wittenberg. The metaphorical gunshot heard round the world starting what came to be a violent and bloody religious and political Reformation.

Today's passage is more than appropriate for Reformation Sunday. Like Jesus and the early church, the Reformers were not seeking to start a new religion but, as the

⁵ Jim Melchiorre, "Living Authentically," *Disciplines: A Book of Daily Devotions 2011*, (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2010), 314.

name suggests, simply to reform the church. Among their complaints against the religious authorities were these very complaints: that the authorities did not practice what they preached, that they were laying heavy burdens on the people, that they were after their own glory rather than God's.

Unfortunately, many of the ills the Reformers sought to extinguish never really went away entirely because they are not simply sins of the Pharisees or Popes. As we all know, one of the primary complaints those outside the church have against Christians is that they consider us hypocritical. And they're right. Most, and I dare say all, of us are hypocrites. Jesus sets a pretty high bar for us in terms of loving God with all our hearts, minds, souls and strength and our neighbors as ourselves. Striving to do so we can't help but fall short from time to time. But as for me, I'd rather strive to meet God's expectations, fall short and try again than to simply dismiss God's yearning or take it upon myself to lower the bar.

It's true. Hypocrisy and pride are human nature. And Christian though we may be, we are still human so hypocrisy and pride are traps into which most, if not all, of us fall. I know I am not immune.

And I am certainly not qualified to tell you how to "practice what we preach" and avoid hypocrisy and pride. And the catch 22 is, if I were to tell you, I would be inevitably falling into hypocrisy and pride myself. I can't tell you how to avoid it, all I can do is be a cheerleader. All I can do is encourage you—and myself—to keep trying to be authentic in our discipleship, and when we do find ourselves slipping into hypocrisy, simply start over, recommitting ourselves to following Jesus. The good news is: there is an antidote for hypocrisy and pride. Grace is the antidote. Grace which God freely bestows upon each one of us. And it is our great blessing that God loves us with the unconditional love of a parent who knows each beloved child despite our flaws.