

The St. John's Pulpit

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JESUS WOULDN'T IGNORE THE NEEDY OR THE HYPOCRITE

Lenten Series: Imitating the Spirituality of Jesus: What Jesus Wouldn't Do

Matthew 23:13-15, 23-27; 25:31-46

Second Sunday during Lent, February 21, 2016

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Last night, in the sacred space of this sanctuary, Natalie Erdman and Durning Moore exchanged their wedding vows. But why? They did so because commitment matters and each wedding renews our practice of this realization? That said, many people attend weddings and miss the point. In fact, it is easy to drift over time and forget why we do much of what we do.

A couple approached me to officiate a renewal of marriage vows on their 50th wedding anniversary. Their children and grandchildren gathered as the couple recited their vows once again, holding hands and looking into one another's faces. They had buried the parents who stood with them a half-century earlier. They had walked through the challenges of parenting children, her cancer and his heart surgeries. Tears were wiped from the faces of the daughters. And, when it was all finished, I said, "You may kiss your wife." After the kiss, the six-year-old grandson shouted, "Good, they're married. Let's go eat." That chapel was filled with commitment and renewal and love on that day; and that poor lad missed the point of it all.

These weeks leading up to Easter's celebration are to prevent us from missing the point of it all. Lent stems from the Latin word, 'lencten,' signifying the lengthening hours of daylight. Lent symbolizes a season when we allow the light of God to extend its influence in how we live. This season of Lent calls to us saying, 'renew your commitment to live in godly ways.' I offer two ways we renew our commitments with God so we do not miss the point of it all.

1. We renew our commitment to live in Godly ways by avoiding our capacity to be hypocrites. In

Jesus, two kingdoms collide. When you hear Jesus' message, you must choose to follow the pathway Jesus describes as hypocrisy or the pathway Jesus describes that leads to God.

When Jesus speaks of hypocrisy, he is not speaking of being a phony or being duplicitous or pretending. Jesus is speaking in the tradition of Deuteronomy which sees hypocrisy as *godlessness*. Hypocrisy happens when we are so much in touch with how others see us that we lose touch with The Living God who motivates personal actions. Hypocrisy is godless living.

A man visiting a village in Italy became impressed by an elderly woman who came to a statue of Mary, Mother of Jesus each and every day. She approached the statue with deep devotion. After a few days, he mentioned her faithfulness to his friend who had been the village priest for decades. The priest explained to his guest that he was not seeing what he thought he was seeing. When this woman had been a young woman, she was the model for this artist's statue of Mary. Through the years, she came every day to admire her own beauty and spoke to the people of the village that she must have been the most beautiful of all of his models.

Jesus teaches us to be careful lest we worship our version of godliness and end up living godlessly. This is why Jesus offers the woes to these experts in Jewish Law and the Pharisees. In Matthew 23, your loving Jesus repeats a phrase five times: "*How terrible it will be for you legal experts and Pharisees! Hypocrites!*" The words Jesus uses are a type of lament. Jesus' voice is similar to his lamentation over Jerusalem. It is as if Jesus is saying, "*this is terrible;*

"This is so sad...you shut people out of participating in the Kingdom of God."

"This is so sad...you push people away from the Kingdom of God."

"This is so sad...you refuse to humble yourselves and enter a relationship with God."

"This is so sad...you are converting people to follow your hypocrisy."

"This is so sad...you obey some spiritual practices that focus on external expressions – practices such as tithing which you should follow; yet, you ignore or refuse to remember the more important spiritual practices of justice, peace and faithfulness."

Of course, it is tempting to label today's legalistic fundamentalists as contemporary representations of experts in the law and Pharisees. Yet, this would not be true to Jesus' message. For Jesus is calling to each of us and all of us, saying,

"Allow the light of God to shine into the corners of your living.

Open the closets and areas of your life that you try to keep separate from your relationship with The Living God.

Invite the light of God to show you ways you can help people participate in the Kingdom of God or reclaim those who have been pushed away from the Kingdom of God.

Invite the light of God to nurture your humility in relationship with God.

Invite the light of God to show you where you may be obeying God, but just going through the motions.

Invite the light of God to show you ways to practice justice, peace and faithfulness.”

One way we refuse to miss the point of it all is by renewing our commitment to live in Godly ways by avoiding our capacity to be hypocrites. AND

Another way we refuse to miss the point of it all is by renewing our commitment to live in Godly ways by serving the needs of others. We heard a dramatic presentation of Jesus’ words.

St. John’s, you are involved in feeding the hungry, providing clean water to the malnourished, welcoming the immigrant, sheltering the homeless, clothing the poor, caring for the sick and visiting the prisoner. And, let’s be honest, there are more hurts than we can heal. A couple of weeks ago, I reminded our deacons why we continue to invest in ministry. The Spirit of God enlivens the Living Christ within you to care for the Living Christ in others.

The next time you find yourself ready to give up on someone; the next time you grow weary in well doing; the next time you find yourself out of ‘one more chances;’ remember you are not serving that person. The Living Christ within you is serving the Living Christ in them. If we thought we – as mere human beings – were supposed to transform another person, we would have given up long ago. But, we’re still here. Why? Because we know the point of it all.

When you are weak, God provides renewed strength. When you are empty of mercy, God fills you with mercy. Your human patience, limitations of grace and low capacity to forgive again are real. Yet, you are not merely serving that face you can see. You are serving the face of Jesus behind that face. And, most of the time, you are so caught up in serving the person you can see that you are blind to the Presence. Yet, each person you serve is Jesus.

A young man knelt in prayer and sensed God calling him to renew the church. He began restoring the badly decayed chapel by begging for supplies, buying materials and borrowing tools. Then, over time, Francis of Assisi realized he had missed the point. It was not the building needing renewal; it was the church. Amen and AMEN!