

## **Reformation Sunday + October 30, 2011**

A few weeks ago, Britt and I traveled to Northern Idaho and were privileged to participate in the 125<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the congregation I first served as a pastor. It was great to see people I had not seen in a very long time and it was fun to notice what had change and what had remained the same in the church, the town and the community. We shared many memories that weekend and I found myself both laughing and crying over those shared memories ... all the joys and sorrows that took place over the six and a half years that I lived there.

I had to thank these folks for helping form me. This was the place where I “cut my teeth” on pastoral ministry. In many instances they were very patient with me and forgiving toward me. Since that Anniversary celebration, I’ve been thinking a great deal about my time there and the stories play over and over in my mind. Let me share with you, today, one of these stories.

I decided in my first year there to go visit a fellow who was not a member of the church but was related to members of the church. I got to know him outside of the church and he was a person I liked very much. My mission was to go try to persuade him to become a member of the church. I was, in those days, very idealistic and felt I could climb every mountain, meet every challenge and solve every problem! Well, my friend must have known that this was my agenda. In just moments after we sat down over coffee, he began to tell me why he would personally never darken the doors of the church. He told me he knew the folks at the church very well. Some of them grew up with and he knew that they did not always live up to the very things they professed as Christians. He felt their lives were filled with hypocrisy. He told me that they did not practice what they preached.

As I listened to my friend’s tirade, part of me wanted to defend some folks who were, in my opinion, being maligned unfairly. Another part of me was in agreement with some of what he was saying and downright sympathetic with his views. Much of what he expressed and felt could not be disputed. It was a very difficult situation and I knew, too, something of that experience where those who claim the faith of Jesus do not always represent Jesus to the world.

My friend’s tirade isn’t all that different that the tirade Jesus gives in today’s Gospel reading. Over the past several weeks we have heard in the Gospel lessons Jesus going toe to toe with the religious leaders of his day – the scribes, the Pharisees, the Sadducees. They question, probe, test and even try to trap Jesus. Now, in today’ Gospel, it seems that Jesus has had quite enough. He is at the end of his rope. So, Jesus calls them out. He exposes the hypocrisy of the religious establishment. He says that they do not practice what they preach.

In speaking to the crowds, Jesus says that while they pass on the essence of God’s teachings they themselves do not live it out. They love, instead, the trappings of religion as a privilege. They love their titles. They enjoy flattery and prestige and much of their religious behavior is motivated by a desire to be seen and recognized. While the faith is to be about God, it becomes all about them.

Jesus names the hypocrisy: they say one thing and do another. Then, if you read the rest of chapter 23 in Matthew’s Gospel it gets even more vitriolic. Jesus launches into a series of woes against the Pharisees and their hypocrisy and how they neglect the matters of love and justice. As I read it I find myself saying “You go Jesus!” Part of me is so glad that he is calling them

out. Then, as I read it closer, especially today's Gospel reading, my spirit of "you go Jesus" dissipates into something a little more self-reflective and I am given pause because I think he is also talking about me and you. He's talking about us. The crowd Jesus addresses includes the disciples, those closest to him ... his trusted followers. He says that they need to be weary of allowing the things of faith to become mere prompts for making themselves look good. Surely such a road of self-glory will lead to a kind of humiliation. Better to take the road of real humility in deference to the one Messiah.

Those who have studied Matthew's Gospel are pretty much in agreement that these words of Jesus are as much directed to leaders in Matthew's church as anyone, those who were a little too full of themselves. The desire to have first place isn't confined to those with whom Jesus tussled. It is a problem in the church too. As usual, Jesus exposes the truth about ourselves. In exposing the truth, it isn't just about those people out there. It includes all of us. You and me included.

How easy it is to fall into hypocrisy – saying one thing and doing another. We are affected, all of us, by our culture and the pressure to look good. We are judged by appearances, status and wealth. Jesus says something quite different than that, but we feel the pressure of other agendas. And who among us has not been tainted by a certain kind of pride that comes with having a religious identity? We might wear the label "Lutheran" or "Methodist" or "Baptist" or "Episcopalian" like badge of honor or even become excessively prideful of the congregation to which we belong.

Who among us has not become excessively prideful about the congregation to which we belong? I know of a church that does fabulous ministry but was properly cautioned by an elder in that church who worried that they were patting themselves on the back too much. Sometimes, too, we may get really excited about the ministry that we are involved in or lead. Maybe so excited that we fall into the trap of believing that somehow our particular ministry is the most important and then, instead, of contributing to the common good, we find ourselves in competition with others and the spirit of Jesus suddenly goes begging.

No. We do not always practice what we preach. That's what I told my friend in that difficult conversation almost 25 years ago. I also shared with him one other thing. I told him how I understood what he was saying and how, yes, indeed the folks who went to the church or go to any church are not perfect and I said something like, "I want to still invite you to come and worship with us, because there's always room for one more hypocrite."

Being a hypocrite is not OK but admitting that we are is, I think, a good thing. For with that honest admission we are not so likely to presume a posture of self-righteousness. Better yet, such an admission drives us to Jesus who not only exposes the truth about ourselves but freely gives us himself and shows us something of what means to be humble. We are driven, so much of the time, by laying heavy burdens not just on others but on ourselves as well. When we expend so much energy in appearances and the need to be recognized, the practices of faith that are meant to free us become onerous. But, listen to Jesus who offers a different way: "Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." We do well to turn always toward a humble Messiah who always practices what he preaches. Amen.