First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

11/5/23

**Religious Fashion Shows**

Matthew 23:1-12 (MSG)

**23 1-3**Now Jesus turned to address his disciples, along with the crowd that had gathered with them. “The religion scholars and Pharisees are competent teachers in God’s Law. You won’t go wrong in following their teachings on Moses. But be careful about following *them*. They talk a good line, but they don’t live it. They don’t take it into their hearts and live it out in their behavior. It’s all spit-and-polish veneer. **4-7**“Instead of giving you God’s Law as food and drink by which you can banquet on God, they package it in bundles of rules, loading you down like pack animals. They seem to take pleasure in watching you stagger under these loads, and wouldn’t think of lifting a finger to help. Their lives are perpetual fashion shows, embroidered prayer shawls one day and flowery prayers the next. They love to sit at the head table at church dinners, basking in the most prominent positions, preening in the radiance of public flattery, receiving honorary degrees, and getting called ‘Doctor’ and ‘Reverend.’

**8-10**“Don’t let people do that to *you*, put you on a pedestal like that. You all have a single Teacher, and you are all classmates. Don’t set people up as experts over your life, letting them tell you what to do. Save that authority for God; let *him* tell you what to do. No one else should carry the title of ‘Father’; you have only one Father, and he’s in heaven. And don’t let people maneuver you into taking charge of them. There is only one Life-Leader for you and them—Christ. **11-12**“Do you want to stand out? Then step down. Be a servant. If you puff yourself up, you’ll get the wind knocked out of you. But if you’re content to simply be yourself, your life will count for plenty.

Don’tcha just hate it when folks think they’re all that and a bag of chips too? You all know the type of people I’m referring to, I’m sure; the ones who because of the positions they hold, or the possessions they have collected, think they’re better than anyone else? The ones who look down on those who aren’t as well educated, or as wealthy, as others around them? Frankly, these types of people absolutely drive me nuts and I will do just about anything possible to avoid them.

It’s bad enough when we have to deal with these types of people out in the secular world, but running into folks like this within the church is much, much worse, especially if those folks are in leadership positions.

And that’s just the point that Jesus was making in today’s reading. By this time, Jesus had to have be totally fed up with the desperate attempts of these religious leaders to trip him up. None of these efforts had worked and now Jesus has shifted gears and is going on offensive.

He starts out by telling his disciples that indeed the Pharisees and the Sadducees know the law of Moses and that they are competent teachers of the law. But then he draws an important distinction. He tells his followers that they won’t go wrong if they follow the *teachings* articulated by these learned religious scholars and leaders, BUT Jesus warns his disciples not to follow the Pharisees and the Sadducees themselves. Why? Because Jesus knows that the Pharisees and the Sadducees talk a good talk, but they don’t walk the walk.

And Jesus doesn’t simply leave it there. He goes into great detail describing exactly what he means, when he says that they talk a good line, but they don’t live it. The Pharisees and the Sadducees, according to Jesus, place burdensome rules on their followers, without lifting a finger to help; they insist on places of honor at table; they preen and bask in public flattery and adulation; they are more concerned with their status then with actually helping their followers live into the teachings of the law. Jesus then tells his followers not to let that happen to them. He tells his disciples not to let people put them on pedestals, but instead they are to become servants. And in verse 12, Jesus offers a warning to all those who aren’t willing to take steps to become servants. The New Revised Standard translation, puts that warning this way, “*All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.”*

For those of us who have been entrusted with leadership positions within Christ’s church, these can be difficult words to hear. As I’ve mentioned before, it takes a strong personality and a healthy ego to get up here each and every Sunday and presume to interpret God’s word. It would be very easy for me to demand that I, as your pastor and spiritual leader, be given a significant amount of deference and obedience. It would be very easy to hear all of the positive words you share with about my preaching and everything else I do around here, and allow them to go right to my head and it would be very easy to think of myself as all that and a bag of chips too. It could be a very easy trap for me to fall into, frankly. Now, knowing y’all as I do, I doubt that you’d put up with me for very long if I was this type of leader. And I wouldn’t blame you one bit, for not tolerating such behavior if I were to succumb to the temptation of allowing myself to, in the words of my mother, get too big for my britches.

Returning to the passage, and looking again at verse 12, it provides the basis for the concept of servant leadership. It’s a simple concept, really. What it means is that we are called to live into the teachings of Christ by serving others. What this looks like, for me, is that I don’t go around barking orders like a general, but instead it’s about my doing whatever needs to be done, as I’m able, in order to keep things running smoothly around here. And yes, that has meant unclogging toilets, on more than one occasion.

One of the things I love most about our Presbyterian way of doing things, is the fact that the authority of the Pastor is relatively curtailed. Let me explain what I mean. Since we elect Elders to govern our congregation, the final say on most everything thing pertaining to the life of this congregation, rests with the Session. This type of bottom up system, is specifically designed to prevent the behavior that Jesus is talking about here. I often note that I have the least amount of authority of all of my counterparts in other denominations and, you know what, that’s perfectly OK with me. Yes, there are areas in our corporate life, where I have the final say, but even in those areas, hopefully, I am open to hearing what the spirit is saying to and through you.

I’ve talked quite a bit about the importance of being a servant as it pertains to me and the position that you’ve entrusted me with. But, the need for servant leaders can also be applied on a larger scale. What happens when leaders of entire denominations succumb to the temptations that Jesus is so obviously warning against in this passage? What happens when leaders of entire denominations place burdensome rules on their followers without lifting a finger to help? What happens when doctrine and dogma become more important than love? What happens when these leaders claim that they, and they alone, know the will of God and anyone who might offer a different perspective is, at best, considered an apostate and, at worst, someone who becomes a threat and needs to be silenced? What happens whenthese learned religious leaders don’t take the message of Jesus into their hearts and live it out in their behavior?

Sadly, this is the experience of far too many of our siblings in Christ and, speaking as someone who often deals first hand with the fallout from this type of behavior, I can tell you that the results are often catastrophic.

Folks, we are not called to put ourselves, or anyone else, on pedestals; we are not called to think of ourselves as better than; we are not called to demand honor and prestige; we are not called to think of ourselves as all that and a bag of chip too. If we truly follow Jesus, then we *all* must be willing to walk humbly with each other and with God. Yes, that sometimes means being willing to pitch in and set up tables, or vacuum the carpet, or making coffee, or whatever else needs to be done, and yes, that can mean even wielding a plunger, now and then.

We are blessed that the ideals of servant leadership are alive and well in this place, and I am truly grateful for everything that each and every one of you do to honor God and this community in those ways.

I’ll close with these words, written in 1969, from the hymn, The Church of Christ in Every Age; *“Then let the servant church arise, a caring church that longs to be a partner in Christ’s sacrifice, and clothed in Christ’s humanity.”*

May we, individually and collectively, continue to talk the talk and walk the walk by being the servant church to each other, our community and the world, AMEN