

"A Place of Honor" | Matthew 23:1-12 | November 5, 2017
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In 1949 when St. Mark Lutheran Church was first established as a congregation of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, the Christian Church occupied a place of honor and prestige in American culture. After WWII, as people moved out to the west coast in pursuit of jobs, the church had only to build a building and hang a shingle and the church would grow.

This was certainly the case with St. Mark, as she began in 1949 with 53 communicant members and 40 children. 5 months later, another 20 communicant members were added. In the middle of the 20th century, the Christian church – including St. Mark - occupied a place of honor in American culture.

It certainly doesn't take a sociologist to tell you that this is no longer the case. We live in what Bob Newton calls a 'post-churched' culture. American culture at large doesn't remember why one would ever go to church, why it's important, why the church and its message is even relevant. As we've talked about in the past, a staggeringly few residents of the greater Bay Area attend worship at a Christian church. The church no longer occupies a place of honor in American culture.

For many people, the response to this turn of fortunes, if you will, is, understandably, fear. Fear for the future of our own local congregations, fear for the path the country is set on, fear for their children and grandchildren who no longer attend church. When such drastic change comes, the future looks bleak and scary. If you're like me, you often feel paralyzed by this fear, uncertain of what to do next.

Our Gospel reading, however, points a way forward.

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In our text from Matthew 23:1-12 we catch up with Jesus as he is teaching in the temple just a day or so after riding into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Although He had received a hero's welcome on that day, as He enters into the city Jesus runs smack into the opposition of the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Scribes – all religious leaders who seek to trap Jesus in his words, hoping to find a reason to get rid of Him once and for all. But so far, he has left everyone speechless. Test after test Jesus is able to silence those who are trying to silence *Him*.

So in our Gospel reading, Jesus turns his focus not to his opponents but to his disciple and the crowds who had gathered to hear him teach. And his message to them is simple: Don't be like the teachers of the law and the Pharisees.

23:1-3a

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, “The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you.

“They sit in Moses’ seat” That is, the teachers of the law and the Pharisees occupied an important place in the life of the Jewish Synagogue. They sat in Moses’ seat, an actual seat in the synagogue, and were charged with reading the scriptures to the people who had gathered. To sit in Moses’ seat was to be the guy who read the Bible to the assembly. That was their job, an important job in the life of the Jewish worshipping community.

So, Jesus affirms that those who gather to listen to God’s Word read aloud in the synagogue must continue to listen to and adhere to that which is read. Jesus had just summarized the law and the prophets for them: Love God and love neighbor. Hear the word and then *do* the word. Hear the Word and God’s promises to you.

23:3b-4

But, Jesus continues, the people weren’t to follow the Pharisees and scribes blindly. At first glance, it appears as though Jesus’ issue with the teachers of the law and the Pharisees is that they’re classic hypocrites. They don’t practice what they preach and, indeed, Jesus will take them to task in the rest of chapter 23 for being hypocrites. But the truth of the matter is that the Pharisees did exactly what they preached.

They had rules and regulations for Sabbath keeping, maintaining ritual purity, tithing, fasting. And all of these rules they kept to a T. So, this can’t be Jesus’ charge against them. It wasn’t like their preaching was OK but their practice was bad. No, their preaching was terrible and their practice was bad too!

What Jesus’ charge is, is that they read the scriptures but they don’t do *them*. They adhere perfectly to the oral tradition of laws and prescriptions but they neglect the most important commandments: love God and love neighbor.

If you were to go to Israel even to this day, you would see the fruits of this. On Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath, they have special elevators that go from floor to floor to floor so you don’t have to press a button. That’s work and you can’t do that on the Sabbath. Don’t even think about driving a car through the Orthodox sections of town unless you want to get stoned. And if you were to go to Israel today and look at the ruins from around the time of Jesus, you’d see more mikvah than you could shake a stick at. A mikvah is a bath, a ritual bathing pool, where one could go to ritually purify one’s self.

These are the fruits of the preaching of the Pharisees. These are the heavy loads that they put on men's shoulders and don't care whether or not they are crushed underneath them.

So, this is Jesus' first charge against the Pharisees. Don't be like these guys because even though it's their job to read the Word of God to the people, they speak it but they ignore it in favor of the rules and reg's they themselves made up.

23:5-7

Not only have they created these traditions, but all of this pious work isn't out of love for God or neighbor, but it's done in order to impress other people! Jesus continues in verse 5,

Everything they do is done for man to see; they make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them Rabbi.

This is not a works-righteousness kind of thing but a spiritual one-ups-man-ship that Jesus is condemning here and warning his disciples to stay away from. It's the creation of different classes or levels of piety that exalt on class, the religious leaders, and humble the rest who don't have the chops to perform at such a high level.

Everything the Pharisees did was designed to make other people say, "whoa! Look how good that guy is!" They enjoyed the titles of Rabbi, Father, Teacher. They enjoyed the prestige that accompanied these things. They didn't love God and they didn't love their neighbor.

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Put simply, this is not how the Reign of God works. The Reign of God does not come in glory. The Reign of God does not seek fame and fortune. The Reign of God comes in a manger on Christmas. The Reign of God comes in a cross on Good Friday.

The Reign of God comes in Jesus who, though He is very God of very God, does not place heavy burdens on his people but rather, as Matthew writes in chapter 11, Jesus brings rest. Jesus says, "Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest for your souls for my yoke is easy and my burden is light". Jesus didn't come to crush us with the law.

He came for those of us who grew up thinking the Church was an institution that demanded we act in a particular way...like Christianity is just a list of rules that we must follow in order to be on the winning side. He came for those who are always trying to live up to some unspoken expectation but can never quite reach it. Jesus

didn't come to lay heavy burdens on us. Jesus came to lift our burdens...to bring us God's grace through his Word and Sacraments.

And the Reign of God comes in Jesus who, although He is Lord of all, he doesn't not carry on His work as the Son of God merely for the sake of optics. He doesn't teach and heal and drive out demons so that people will look at Him as he passes by and go 'whoa...there goes Jesus!' No, the work that Jesus does, the work that only he can do, is saving work for all people which brings life to this world dead in its sin.

He came to work for the people of The Refuge...the people who spend these winter nights at the cold weather shelter. People who have been broken by mental illness, by addiction, by poverty, by abuse. Jesus comes to bring healing and life, abundant life, for them.

And the Reign of God comes in Jesus who, although He is the Son of the living God, he does not demand to sit at the most prominent places. He does not insist on the place of honor at the banquet. No, goes to the most shameful of places. He goes to the darkest of places. He goes to the most cursed of places. He goes to the place of suffering.

Jesus goes to this place, He goes to the cross for people like me. People who sin in thought, word, and deed. People who hear his word but fail to do it. People who are filled with pride, and want to be seen by others doing good and pious work. He goes to the cross with *all* of our sins. *All* of our disobedience. *All* of our pride. He goes to this humiliating place, alone, to crucify this sin of ours and bury it in the grave.

This is the work that Jesus came to do. Work that he alone could accomplish. It's not the Pharisee's way of honor and glory. It's Jesus' way of the cross. Of humility and of service. This is what the Reign of Heaven looks like.

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It's what the Reign of God looked like 2,000 years ago and it's what the Reign of God looks like now. The response of the church to this changing world is same as the response of the early church to the *pre-Christian* world. It's not a response that seeks to regain glory and honor and power in society and culture. It's a response that just simply continues to follow Jesus – to live our lives as servants and not Pharisees or teachers of the law.

To lift the burdens of those hurt by a church which only preached law. To bring life and hope to those who have been broken. Not just bringing them food or clothes but *relationship*. A healing word...a healing touch. And to bring forgiveness to those who are broken by their own sin. The Reign of God came into a world that rejected it through a manger and a cross. Not in honor but in humility. Amen.