

5/29/05

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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Matthew 7:21-29 (NRSV)

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. 22 On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?'

23 Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.'

24 "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. 25 The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. 26 And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. 27 The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell--and great was its fall!"

28 Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, 29 for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

PREACHING WITH AUTHORITY

When I preach a sermon, I want to preach with authority. I want people to be challenged. I want us all to change in response to the gospel message.

Sometimes, if it is because I am preaching the true gospel, I don't even mind if the message stirs up trouble. Sometimes, if I am truly proclaiming the words of Jesus, I don't mind if the message causes us to question our dearest assumptions and change our plans for the future.

In fact, I think good preaching often forces us to do just that.

The worst compliment anyone can give me is to say after the service, “That was a nice talk preacher.”

It may have been a nice talk, but it wasn’t preaching!

My model of a good preacher is (as you might expect) Jesus. No one ever told Jesus, “That was a nice talk.” Jesus said many things, but more often than not, Jesus said things the people didn’t wanted to hear.

I have a minister friend who, when he has to confront someone about a problem in the church, says that he’s going to have a “come to Jesus meeting “ with old “so and so.”

(Being a good Southern boy, he always puts an emphasis on the “G” in Jesus.)

That’s a bit profane, but it is also the truth. When we really come to Jesus, when we really hear what he has to say, we come face to face with the fact that who we are does not match up with the person that Jesus wants us to be. We begin to see that our lifestyle does not fit in with the challenging message of the gospel.

The gospel message creates cognitive dissonance. Or, to put it more simply, the gospel “messes up our mind.”

And, if you listen to the gospel long enough and hard enough, it’ll mess up your life as well.

So, do you want to be really different?

Listen to the Lord Jesus for a while and then actually put his words into practice.

People will think that you are one strange bird!

A CHALLENGING SERMON

The passage that precedes our lesson for today is one of the most famous sermons of all time. And in that sermon Jesus has some very challenging things to say that would have rattled the cages of just about everyone who heard it.

For example, Jesus recalled the Old Testament Law that prescribed an “eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” In other words, it was permissible to take revenge upon another person in proportion to the harm that they had done to you.

But, Jesus had something even more radical to say. Jesus said, “Turn the other cheek. Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you.” (Matthew 5:38-48)

Our Lord also said many other “outrageous” things; things like “don’t worry about having food, clothing and a roof over your head. Your heavenly Father will give you everything you need. Just worry about doing His will.” (Matthew 6:25-34)

Jesus said, “When you give money to charity always do it anonymously. God will see that you get the proper credit.” (Matthew 6:1-4)

Jesus said, “I know everyone else is acting as if the vows of marriage mean nothing, but listen up, being faithful in marriage is God’s will, and if you disobey, there will be some rather hellish consequences to pay.” (Matthew 5:27-32)

It makes no difference if you are a conservative, a liberal or something in between. There’s always something in Jesus’ sermons that will make you squirm. These teachings of Jesus are still as strange as strawberry pizza, and if you don’t hear them that way, you probably didn’t get the message.

In fact, the teachings of Jesus are just as radical today as they were when he first proclaimed them. They are often the absolute opposite of what many people in our society believe and practice.

But, according to our lesson, these unusual teachings are the foundation for those who want to be disciples of Jesus. These teachings are not an optional extra.

Our Scripture tells us he proclaimed these teachings with authority, the authority that only Almighty God could bestow. There were no qualifications, no “ifs, ands or buts.”

The people who heard that sermon long ago were flabbergasted. It was fascinating and frightening at the same time. They must have asked themselves,

“He really wants us to do that? Love our enemies? Not worry about what tomorrow brings? We’ve never heard anyone talk like that before. Who is this guy?” (Matthew 7:28-29)

THIS OLD HOUSE

Jesus knew that every good sermon needed a catchy illustration so he concluded his controversial sermon with a story about two guys who built a house.

Now, one guy (Jesus called him the wise guy) was a big fan of the popular TV show on PBS, “This Old House.” He knew from watching the master carpenter, Norm Abram and his crew of experts that the most important part of any building project was site preparation.

And, so, he did the necessary hard work. He built his house on a rock.

It wasn’t easy. Building costs were high. It seemed like they would never get through all the county inspections. But, in the long run it was worth it.

Finally, the house was built, and when the hurricanes came (as they did every year) he was ready. The roof had six nails per shingle and his windows were equipped with storm shutters.

His fortified home was able to withstand the onslaught of the terrible wind. And, best of all, the rising water did not make it into his house because his house was built on high ground with a foundation of rock.

Alas, the other guy was not so wise. He wanted to build the cheapest house possible. Oh, he knew better. He too had watched the master carpenter on TV’s “This Old House,” but the foolish guy didn’t pay attention to Norm’s warning about the foundation.

Instead, he was more interested in decorating the home lavishly. So he spent his time and money on things like fancy furniture and custom cabinets.

In order to save money for the extras, the foolish man picked a site that needed minimal preparation. The ground was already flat and smooth,

perfect for house building ... or so it seemed. Why, this place even had a tree that would provide shade from the noonday sun.

His neighbors said that it was a cypress tree.

He thought that inspections were a waste of time. His home was in the country so he hired an unlicensed contractor, paid him in cash and hoped no one would ever find out he didn't have a building permit. His home was finished in record time, and he moved right in.

But, soon after that, hurricane season rolled around again. The rains and the wind came, and his home was not up to the challenge. The waters rose and the house came tumbling down with a big crash.

The pictures of his house falling down made the six o'clock news, and he still hasn't gotten a settlement from his insurance company.

Some say that the government isn't going to let anyone build there again ... something about the land being on a flood plain.

THIS OLD LIFE

I know. The story doesn't go quite like that. But, in some respects, the details in the story really don't matter because this story is a parable. The story is not really about building a house. The story is really about building a life.

Every life needs a good foundation, and Jesus said that those who hear his words and put them into practice have a rock-like foundation that will stand up to even the most destructive storm. And what of those who don't have a good foundation? Even a tropical storm can be dangerous.

Now some of us have heard this story for a long time. Some of us have grown up in the church and have heard about Jesus from the time we were little children. We know that Jesus is the rock upon which we should build our life. We know that his commands need to be followed as well as preached.

But, almost every week we hear about some preacher or some prominent church member who gets caught doing the wrong thing. And we ask ourselves,

“How could they have been so blind? How could they have proclaimed the word of Christ and yet been so far from the kingdom?”

Actually, Jesus knew that this would be a problem. Did you notice the warning about the future in our lesson for today? Jesus said,

“Not everyone who calls me Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven. They may have been preachers, Sunday school teachers, choir members or trusted elders.

But, I was not the Lord of their life. I was merely the lord of their lips.”
(Matthew 7:21-23)

I don't know about you, but I find that thought frightening. This passage tells us we can go through the motions of serving Christ, and yet not be a part of His kingdom. We can kid ourselves and everyone around us about what we really believe and whom we really serve.

STAR WARS THEOLOGY

I, along with many others, watched the final installment of the Star Wars movies this past week. It has been twenty-eight years since my young bride and I went to that first movie. I remember being amazed by the special effects. In some ways, the movie was totally unique.

But, in other ways, the first movie seemed very familiar. It was sort of like an old time Western set in space. The bad guy even wore black, and the good guy even wore white.

But, as the plot developed in the many movies that followed, we began to get a more complex picture. We found out that the bad guy, Darth Vader, used to be a good guy. In fact he used to be a “Jedi Knight” dedicated to doing the right thing, helping others instead of helping himself.

What made him change? How did the good guy become the bad guy?
Inquiring minds wanted to know.

In fact, these questions brought record numbers of us to the movie theaters this past week. Despite some poorly done sequels to the Star Wars series, we needed plot resolution, and we needed it bad. We needed to know how the

cute little kid grew up to be a mass murderer. We needed to know how someone could proclaim such high ideals and yet become the epitome of evil.

Of course, these questions are not new ones. Good and evil are in some ways a great mystery. We cannot predict whose life will collapse when the wind and water of temptation come their way.

Why did the bright young businessman decide to cook the books at Enron? Did he need a few more courses in ethics at Yale?

Why did some nice young boys in a middle class neighborhood decide to kill their classmates and then turn the guns on themselves in a suicide pact? If they had posted the Ten Commandments on the walls of the school would these kids have known that killing was wrong and not gone on their shooting spree?

Why did a Presbyterian minister in Florida shoot a physician who was performing legal abortions? He believed that taking life was a sin. Didn't he know that killing the doctor was a sin as well? Hadn't he heard that Jesus said that we were to love our enemies and pray for them? Was he asleep when they taught that in seminary?

These and many other sad stories like them make it obvious that education alone is not the answer. We can know a great deal about what is right and still do the most horrific things. The story of Star Wars might be from a galaxy far, far way and a long time ago, but it can be a true story here and now.

Sometimes the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

KNOWING AND DOING

It is not just what we believe that matters. It is also what we do. James was right when he wrote in the Bible that faith and works are two sides of the same coin. (ex. James 1:22; 2:14) You can't have one without the other.

William Willimon, the former chaplain at Duke University said that there has been a lot of talk lately about better values. He wrote,

“In schools we have value education, values clarification, values-centered teaching. On a college campus if you propose a program for ‘values and ...’ you are sure to get a big grant.”

Willimon goes on to say that these discussions about values are often rather thin. They contain what he called an “innocuous shopping list of vague attributes like fairness or respect.” He contends that what we need to be talking about is not values but character.

We need to think about how people become dependable, responsible individuals who are true to what they believe in most deeply. In order to do that we must find a way to talk about our values and also put those values into action.

Several years ago the Presbyterian Church decided to take what I might call a “smorgasbord” approach to Christian education. They knew that our church was divided and decided to develop a curriculum that would meet the needs of the various groups in our church.

Some thought that the job of Christian education was just to teach the facts, to tell people what was in the Bible. For those people they developed a curriculum called “Knowing the Word.”

Others in our denomination believed that the job of the church was to get people involved in social action. For those members, a more socially aware curriculum called “Doing the Word” was developed.

Despite the good intentions of our denominational staff, I suspect they soon realized that they had made a mistake. Do you know which curriculum sold the most copies?

“Knowing the Word” sold the most copies by far. People were much more comfortable talking about what Jesus did “way back when” than considering what Jesus might want us to do “here and now.”

But, it seems to me that both parts of that old curriculum were necessary. If we don’t know the words of Jesus, how can we follow them? And if we don’t put the teachings of Jesus into practice, how can we say that we know Him?

According to our lesson for today, we must know and do the Word.

Robert McAfee Brown summed it up well long ago when he wrote,

“The fatal error is to read the Bible as a spectator rather than a participant, to make the faulty assumption that we can sit in a box seat watching the drama when actually we are on the stage taking part in the drama.”

WOODWORKING

Many years ago I decided to take up woodworking. I didn't do it because I thought woodworking would be a fun and productive hobby. I did it because I was totally inept when it came to fixing things, and I was tired of my new wife saying,

“Well my daddy could fix that.”

So, I went to Sears and Roebuck and bought myself a drill and a Skill saw. I also bought a magazine with a few woodworking projects in it and decided that my first project should be a workbench.

But, since I couldn't carry wood that was long enough and wide enough in my small car, I decided to cut the wood for the top down the middle and patch it when I got back home. After much frustration, I built the saddest looking “workbench” you have ever seen in your life. It looked like a giant “V” as it collapsed in the middle!

I learned a big lesson with my first woodworking project. I learned that it's one thing to read about doing a project and quite another to actually build something. Building requires careful attention to detail if the project plans are to become a successful finished project.

You'll be glad to know that I'm a much better woodworker now. But, I'm by no means a master carpenter. I take every opportunity I get to talk with people who have more woodworking experience than me, and I actually get excited about going to woodworking shows so that I can learn more about the hobby I love.

Over time I have learned more and more by reading and doing, by learning and putting into practice the things that I have learned. Both were necessary. And I learn something new about woodworking every time I do a project or talk with a master woodworker.

It occurs to me that Christian character is developed in a similar way. It is a long, laborious process of learning and doing. It is more akin to an apprenticeship than to academic learning.

And the learning process depends heavily upon the input and correction of others who have more experience and are willing to help.

GOD'S BUILDING CODE

The apostle Paul said something similar. He wrote in his first letter to the Corinthians, "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ." 1 Corinthians 11:1 (NRSV)

I think that statement gives us a practical clue as to how we are enabled to hear and do the words of Jesus. We help each other. We imitate each other as we imitate Christ. When we do that, we become the body of Christ.

According to Paul, each one of us has certain strong points, certain spiritual gifts that enable everyone else to grow in the faith. But, none of us are able to make it on our own. (I Corinthians 12:27)

Every step of the way we need to be accountable, accountable to the words of Christ and to the Christian community that Christ formed.

Those of us who have been rebuilding from the hurricanes have learned that you need to have a building permit in order to repair major portions of our home.

Building permits are required because homes have to be built to code. They have to be built to a certain standard so that the homes will be sound and stand the test of time and the elements.

In order to protect us from crooked contractors and our own incompetence, the county or the city sends out building inspectors to make sure that the code is followed.

In a similar way, God has a building code as well.

It is a code that describes how to build a life. His code was spelled out authoritatively by His Son, Jesus, and we are called to follow that code, to put it into practice.

We have not been given this code because God wants to restrict us. We have been given this code because God wants to protect us from our own incompetence and our tendency to choose the wrong instead of the right.

So, friends, let us follow God's building code.

Let us hear and do God's will as revealed in Jesus. May God help us choose wisely.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN