

PRACTICE WHAT YOU PREACH

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Texts: I John 3:11, 16-18 and Matthew 23:1-12

Do you practice what you preach? I am sure that you all do and thus that none of you will identify personally with anyone in this anecdote that was passed along to me:

As the stoplight turned yellow an old driver slowed and came to a stop. The tailgating woman behind him went ballistic, pounding on her horn and screaming in frustration as she missed her chance to get through the intersection before the light turned red. Still in mid-rant, she heard a tap on her window and looked up into the grim face of a police officer. He ordered her to exit the car with her hands where he could see them and then took her to the police station where she was searched, fingerprinted, photographed, and placed in a cell. After a couple of hours, a policeman opened the cell door and escorted her back to the booking desk where the arresting officer was waiting with her personal effects. "I'm sorry for the mistake," he said. "You see, I pulled up behind your car while you were blowing your horn, flipping off the guy in front of you, and screaming at him. Then I noticed the 'Choose God' license plate holder, the 'What Would Jesus Do?' bumper sticker, and the chrome-plated Christian fish emblem on the trunk, and I assumed you had stolen the car."

Now I know that none of you would ever do such a thing, but you probably know someone who has, someone whose avowed beliefs or values don't match up with her actions from time to time. There are a host of examples in the political arena these days: congressmen who rail against the deficit as a threat to the nation and then support a tax plan that makes the deficit worse, politicians who publicly decry the indiscretions of an opponent while carrying on their own sordid affairs behind closed doors, candidates for office who make promises they know they can't keep. They say one thing and do another – in politics, at stoplights, in day to day life.

They don't practice what they preach! That was Jesus' indictment of the scribes and Pharisees. The leaders of the people, the successors to

Moses entrusted with the word of the Lord, preached obedience to the law as the path of righteousness and disobedience as the road to perdition. They preached humility and fear of the Lord. But they failed to practice what they preached. At another time Jesus would call them hypocrites. Speaking to the crowds and disciples in Jerusalem that Holy Week, Jesus simply warns: “Do as they say, not as they do.”

Jesus was urging obedience to the Law but not necessarily to the leaders who interpreted it. What did the Law say? Be humble before God. Fear the Lord. Love your neighbor as yourself. How easy those directions are to give, but how difficult they are to live by! The scribes and Pharisees piled religious burdens on the people, but did little to help them bear them. The Law was intended to be a gracious gift from God, but the scribes and Pharisees made it an onerous load of legalisms on the backs of the people. These religious leaders liked the limelight, applause and respect they received. They reveled in their own glory even more than in God’s glory.

They were like the TV evangelist several years back who offered, in return for a contribution to his ministry, a free picture of Jesus with the apostle Paul on Jesus’ left hand and the evangelist himself on his right. (I’m not sure who took the picture.) Now who was exalted in that offer? Surely not the God who says, “I despise your festivals, take no delight in your solemn assemblies and will not accept your cheap offerings”, the God who demanded:

*Let justice roll down like waters
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream!*

God desires the humble faithfulness of the widow’s mite, not the tarnished luster of hypocritical gold. God desires servant leaders not self-serving leaders. God desires righteous people, not self-righteous people. Yet again and again there are those who try to use God for their own selfish goals.

That was Jesus’ criticism of the scribes and Pharisees. They liked their positions of power and the perks that went with them – the places of honor at banquets, the best seats in the house, the admiration of the people. They were like the new pastor in Richmond whose first act was to make sure that the academic degrees of the staff were listed in all church publications so that everyone would know that he had a PhD. The scribes

and Pharisees liked the status of being respected religious officials, but they had abandoned the responsibility which the position demanded. They preached humble faithfulness, but their actions told a different story, for they failed to practice what they preached. “When pride comes, then comes disgrace,” says the proverb, “wisdom is with the humble.” Humility was foreign to the scribes and Pharisees, for they were more concerned with their status among the people than their faithfulness to God.

That is a cautionary word for us this Dedication Sunday when we come to offer our pledges for 2018, even if that pledge is just between you, God and Dave Metz. Do your commitments to the sharing of your time, talents and resources reflect the faith and faithfulness you profess? Or do the words and numbers you have scrawled onto that blue pledge card suggest that, like the scribes and Pharisees, you talk a good game but don’t practice what you preach? As we heard last week, Jesus says that it all starts with whole-hearted love for God and love for our neighbors. Do your commitments reflect those same loving priorities?

In the passage from I John that we heard this morning, John claims that the message the people have heard *from the beginning* is that we should love one another. For some of us that is indeed the message we have heard from our earliest days in the church – a message preached not only by pastors from the pulpit but also by the actions of people in the pews who welcomed and loved us week after week from the beginning, people who were (in songwriter David Bailey’s words) “blessings that all have a name and a face and a voice.” But for others, the first message they heard is about a god of wrath who stands ready to send you to Hell unless you say you believe in Jesus, a god who is always watching and disapproves if you squirm in the pew or ask why the tigers didn’t eat the sheep on Noah’s ark. Such images of God make it easy to live in fear of the Lord but hard to love the Lord. With such a harsh image of God in mind, gifts are offered, not as expressions of love for God and neighbor, but as attempts to satisfy the demands of a very demanding God.

For John and for Jesus the message from the beginning and to the end is love. It is love that found expression in Jesus’ death and resurrection for us, love that finds expression in and through our lives, not by flowery

words but by concrete action. “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?” asks John. It’s a pretty good question! How can we who have so much say that we love God and neighbor and yet offer a pittance toward God’s work and ignore our neighbors’ needs or rationalize how little we should give rather than seeking to give all that we can?

“Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action,” writes John. What do your actions say about **how** you love and **what** you love and **who** you love? “All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted,” says Jesus. Who then is exalted in your life and by your pledge this day?

Some years ago when I preached from this text I wrote some words with Dr. Seuss rhythms, words I had pretty much forgotten so maybe you have too. I think they are worth repeating with slight adaptation for this Dedication Sunday, if only because I don’t know that I can say what God wants me to say any better this:

*Do you practice what you preach?
We’ve just had a report of a church that is tops in this spiritual sport.
The most faithful of all, in all our fair land
Not only sing praises but reach out a hand.*

*They sing alleluias and offer their pledges
They listen to God’s word and pray from pew edges,
Some even sit forward, not just at back ledges.*

*Then when they go forth to their work and their play
They do what they said in their worship that day.
They reach out a hand to their neighbors in need.
They share what they have and repent from their greed.
They visit the sick and they do a good deed.
They tell of the gospel; the hungry they feed.
In a land that is fertile, they nurture God’s seed,
Which we all take for granted, but all of us need.*

*So faithful a people most surely are blessed
By a God who gives nothing to us but God's best.
So how about you? When you leave this good place
When you lay down your hymnal and return to the race
Will you live like its true what you did, what you said
When you sipped from the cup and you swallowed the bread?
Will you give God your heart, soul, and mind 'til you're dead?
Or will you go out and return to your bed
And your home and your work and forget what was said?*

*For that is the question to ponder this day
With examples of saints to show us the way
And Jesus to urge us to hear and obey.
When you exit this space, can you honestly say:
I will do what I say I believe – come what may?*

*I will be a disciple; I will serve, love and teach.
I will tend to the needs of the needy in reach.
I will practice the gospel and that's what I'll preach.
I will practice the gospel in all that I do
I will preach with my life, with a life that is new
I will do it for God and I'll do it for you!*

*Is that what you'll **say** when you go yet again
And exit these doors with these women and men
After making your pledge with the stroke of a pen?
Will your words be the end of the love you extend
Or will you in action make love what you send
To your neighbor and God who loves you without end?*

*For the question is yours to give answer to – then
What will you **do** when I've said my Amen?*

With gratitude for Dr. Seuss and more gratitude to God: Amen