

Sermon

They do not Practice what they Preach

Pastor Lisa Giacomazza

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“Practice what you Preach” – a common mantra that I am sure many of us have said, and many have had said to us. Today Jesus is saying this to the Pharisees and Scribes – the authority of the Jewish tradition at the time, the leaders, the authorities of the Torah or interpreters of the word. As we have been following Jesus over the last several weeks, he has been sparring with these leaders as they have tried to trip Jesus up. But to be fair, Jesus is declaring his own laws. He is not sticking only to the teachings of Moses but expanding upon that message so much so that he’s saying, it’s not enough to be a teacher, not enough to be a leader, not enough to be an authority...you have live into these teachings. And in Jesus’ opinion, they are not.

This led me to ponder how this might apply to the church today. Do we “practice what we preach”? And to evaluate this, we have to decide what do we actually believe? I mean, what are we actually saying week in and week out? We baptized Katana today – what kind of church will this be when Katana is my age? Or should I say will this church be when Katana is my age?

Jesus seemed to understand that some of the behaviors of the authorities who were leading and teaching were not what the people needed or wanted. They liked feeling a little higher, a little more holy, a little more important than the rest and I think in some ways, this still exists today in some aspects of religion. They were saying love one another as the Father loves you and yet they created hierarchy within the church. And this does continue today.

Young people were asked in a survey why they don't attend church. Young, being 35 or under and the number one reason is because they express their faith in other ways, not through traditional church. Now "other ways" was not defined or elaborated in this particular survey but some of their other answers said they felt the church was too judgmental and negative. That they felt the scope of philosophy was too narrow and too single-minded. Younger people esteem open-mindedness and collaboration. They see strength in understanding one another rather than feeling some authority in belief. "churches are afraid of the beliefs of other faiths" they said and an identical proportion felt they are "forced to choose between my faith and my friends." One-fifth of young adults with a Christian background said "church is like a country club, only for insiders"

So perhaps there is some wisdom within this commentary that church today could potentially grow from. Because if this is true, if this is what younger people are thinking and feeling, maybe, like Jesus, we are being challenged to think about how we express our faith both through worship and service.

Looking beyond Jesus' opponents in Matthew 23, we see something else. The criterion for authentic teaching amounts to a fit between content and conduct. True teaching, Jesus says, manifests itself at two levels. First, authentic teachers live into their precepts. And second, authentic teachers do not promote their own status. And I would suffice it to say, authentic faithful do not promote their own good deeds either.

One change we have made here at Bacon this past year is to move the offering from a practice of "passing the plate" to a personal moment of reflection where you decide what and when you give by placing an offering table at the rear

of the sanctuary. It changes that act into something personal between you and God.

But I keep reflecting on the comment – “they express their faith in other ways”. It gave me pause to think are we not able to express our faith in meaningful ways here in the church? Have we limited believers into expressing their faith in only ways that we teach? Is it only through our worship service and prayer and perhaps a few mission projects we promote through the year? If that is the case, surely that is not enough.

So what can we take away from the words of Jesus today? Well perhaps we need to step into the scripture from Joshua. Our scripture reveals a critical moment of transition in the life of the Jewish faith when the great and authoritative leader Moses has died and some poor new leader must follow. “7The Lord said to Joshua, “This day I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, so that they may know that I will be with you as I was with Moses. 8You are the one who shall command the priests who bear the ark of the covenant,” How can anyone be selected to follow Moses? I mean talk about a career – but Joshua jumps right and the first thing he does is he selects 12 leaders to work with him, one from each tribe. And he created a community by selecting leaders from the community. To listen, to lead, to create new understandings – not to just follow suit in every way of what was, but to lead in a new direction.

They carried the ark, the law, the tablets – the heart of their beliefs with them, but they forged upon new roads. Something to truly respect for a faith that has been with us for over 5,000 years.

A fit between content and conduct. Practice what we preach. A clear message for us to ponder and appreciate today. As we look around the sanctuary today, there is much that is as it always was but there are also glimmers of what is new, of what is next. It is my hope that those looking to practice their faith in different ways might come and show us just what that means and lead us, as Joshua led God's people by listening to the voices of the community of faith.

Amen