

20 Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 26 – Year A – October 30, 2011
Joshua 3:7-17; Psalm 107:1-7, 33-37; 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13; Matthew 23:1-12
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We're going to begin with a little Shakespeare this morning. Shakespeare offers a witty and perceptive social commentary of life and love, comedy and tragedy in Elizabethan times, which are often not that different to the challenges of our own life and times. From *The Merchant of Venice* this is the merchant, Antonio speaking to Jewish moneylender, Shylock, "The devil can cite scripture for his purpose. An evil soul producing holy witness is like a villain with a smiling cheek, a goodly apple rotten at the heart: O what a goodly outside falsehood hath!" It's a neat description of a hypocrite. The word originated as a theatrical term for an actor. These days, the word has much more negative connotations. We say it of those who espouse and proclaim certain virtues, without actually doing what they say. There's also an underlying element of deception, like an actor who puts on a mask to disguise their true identity, or a wolf in sheep's clothing.

Jesus gets right to the point in this portion of Matthew's Gospel. He honors the traditional teaching of the scribes and the Pharisees, but he has no time for those who say one thing and do another, especially in matters of faith. Jesus' obvious distaste for what the Pharisees actually embody in their lives leaves Him little choice but to condemn their self-serving behavior. However, the vanity, hypocrisy and arrogance that trouble these first century leaders are not unique to them. Rather they are ubiquitous human characteristics found in all kinds of people across all time-periods. As followers of Christ, the early Matthean community had a different way of living their faith, one that embraced Jesus' teachings of equality in community. Behind Jesus' comments about the heavy burdens that the Pharisees place on others is strict adherence in matters of purity, Sabbath observances, and on tithing. The bottom line of extending these human precepts into everyday life was to exclude the average peasant farmer and his family from worship. Jesus has a major problem with exclusionary doctrines and behaviors. Jesus also has a problem with hierarchical systems of authority. Whichever Gospel account we read, the overarching theme of Jesus' life, death and resurrection is a ministry of reconciliation through servant leadership. God shows no partiality in His abundant love. It is available to all equally. Jesus expresses God's love by healing and restoring all to wholeness in community. And He invites all to be reconciled to God in His name.

Who knows how troubled Jesus was by how little the world reflects the equality of the Holy Trinity. Just look around. In almost every aspect of life, including family, workplace, and government, we cannot seem to conceive of a way of life that is not based on hierarchical power structures. Yet according to Scripture, everyone is equal in the kingdom of God, reflecting the Godhead in which God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are co-equal and co-eternal. In our world, the confusion usually lies in purely *functional* differences between individuals. For example, it's clear that we all differ in physical strength, mental capacity, the variety of gifts in which we are blessed, and our available financial resources from poverty to great wealth. Nonetheless, everyone has something to offer, and everyone is equally valuable. Even within the church, there are functional differences that tend to morph into hierarchical strictures. As your priest and pastor, I have a specific role and function in the life of this community of faith, and in the broader community. However, I'm in no way more or less important than anybody else is. Our functional differences don't make you or me better or worse than anyone else. We are all simply and inarguably equal before God. You and I – every follower of Christ – are first and foremost servants of God in Christ. We are then servants in love of one another. Then, and only then, are some called to the responsibility of exercising a God-given spiritual gift of leadership. Servant leadership is always about being a servant and serving others first. As Jesus says, "The greatest among you will be your servant." In Matthew 20:28 he also says, "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many". Servant leadership requires sacrificial and selfless giving, not at all what Jesus observed

in the lives of the Pharisees.

Jesus is disturbed that the leaders are apparently more concerned about human accolades than about being servants to the people. This sad display of self-aggrandizement, like any that we see today, is a sinful shift in focus. Instead of looking to God, pride diverts our true mission in order to draw attention to ourselves. It's a very hollow reward to trade God's mission and approval, for human accolades. As Paul says on more than one occasion, he imitates Christ by always trying to please God, not mortals. According to St. Augustine, "Pride is a perverted imitation of God. For pride hates a fellowship of equality under God, and seeks to impose its own dominion on [others], in the place of God's rule." Equality before God insists that the proud humble themselves. On the other hand, equality also means that the marginalized must take their rightful place among God's children, and share their gifts to build up the Body of Christ. The measure of authentic discipleship is not in reciting doctrines, but in faithfully orienting our hearts towards God.

At our Bible study last Sunday, everyone was invited to consider one thing that we could do this week to move closer to God in Christ Jesus, or to take a step towards a deeper relationship with God. God extends the same offer to everyone, every day. Yet almost every day, we find ways to ignore Him, or set God aside for something that we must believe is more important, or something that we value more highly. Here's the bottom line. If we made a record of our daily choices, like how we spend our time and money, it would be a portfolio of how we live our faith. It would reveal what we really focus on the most. Our personal portfolio would tell how we honor God, or not, by embodying in thought, word and deed, what we say we believe. The Good News here is that God our Father loves us unconditionally. He forgives all our sins. He is merciful and compassionate. With abundant love and grace, He is always reaching out to draw us closer to Him, and help us to surrender one little corner of our life at a time.

There's more good news in today's lesson. As Jesus reveals, we each have the opportunity to live with integrity as servants of God's grace. It's no coincidence that integrity and humility are intimately connected. Thomas Merton writes, "Humility consists in being precisely the person you actually are before God... This individuality ... will not be a matter of mere appearances, or opinions, ... or ways of doing things. It is something deep in the soul." He goes on to say, "The humble take whatever there is in the world that helps them to find God and leave the rest aside.... Humility brings with it ... a peacefulness, tact and common sense". Living with integrity requires great humility. To be the person God has created us to be, requires that we humbly lose ourselves in Christ, and set aside the desire to be honored by others. Living humbly empowers us to let go of earthly goals that tempt us towards selfish pursuits. Living with integrity means aligning our wills with God's will. We don't know where God will take us on our life journey. Nonetheless, in simple faith we let go of worldly securities and place our lives in God's gentle care, trusting in Him completely. Humility does not demand its pound of flesh, but offers God's gift of mercy and compassion. It takes a lot of humility and courage to say "yes" to the movement of the Holy Spirit. It's not easy to accept the necessity of change that leads to spiritual growth. It's hard to let go of the things that make us feel safe and secure, to risk faith for the sake of the Gospel. We must make the commitment to put God first in our lives every day, so that He can equip us fully to serve our neighbors. God calls us to love authentically, without judgment or partiality. Our mission is to share the Good News of Jesus Christ in all ways, at all times, and with all people.

Amen.