

Wednesday, February 10, 2016
All Saints Episcopal Church
San Leandro, California
The Rev. Justin R. Cannon
Ash Wednesday

Integrity in Thought, Word, and Deed

Each service we read lessons from the Revised Common Lectionary, a collection of readings from the Bible for use in Christian worship, compiled in 1983. This collection, or lectionary, of readings is used Roman Catholics in the United States and Canada, as well as Lutherans, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Methodists, the United Church of Christ, and even Seventh Day Adventists.

This collection of readings runs in three-year cycles through the Gospels. The first year they are from the Gospel of Matthew; the second year from the Mark; and the third year from Luke. Portions of the Gospel of John are read throughout the Easter season, and other liturgical seasons.

I am often just as fascinated by which sections, or verses, the RCL—Revised Common Lectionary—leaves out of the prescribed readings, as I am by those that they include. Not only are some sections of the gospels not ever read in the RCL cycle, but also in some of the readings they do prescribe they sometimes omit certain verses within a given reading. Like today's Gospel, the prescribed reading is Matthew 6:1-6 and 16-21. When I see something like that, it leaves me wondering what's going on in verses 7-15 and why they cut that out.

In today's gospel lesson Jesus really comes down on religious hypocrites—so often characterized by the scribes and Pharisees in the scriptures. A scribe was basically a scripture scholar. Sometimes in cultural depictions of Jesus, or sometimes even in sermons or religious images of Christ, he is caricatured as a peace-loving hippie. Godspell comes to mind. Sometimes he is spoken of as a really nice guy, especially by non-Christians who admit he was a nice guy, but not quite God incarnate. Jesus shatters these depictions not only in how he handles the money changers in the temple—flipping over their tables and setting their livestock free—but also in today's lesson. He confronts, head on, the hypocrisy of the religious leaders of his day.

Origen Adamantius, who lives from 184 AD to 253 AD was an early Christian scholar and theologian, and one of the most prolific writers of the early Church. In his commentary on this gospel lesson from Matthew he writes:

“There are some in the church who have the right understanding of the law and pass it on correctly. They say what each person needs to do, but they themselves do not do it. Some of them lay heavy burdens upon the shoulders of men, but they won't even lift a finger to help. These are the ones the Savior is talking about when he says, ‘Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of God.’ These are others, however, who sit on the throne, who act before they speak and speak wisely, restraining those who are disordered. They place merciful burdens on the shoulders of others. They themselves are the first to lift the heavy burden,

for the exhortation of other listeners. It is these of whom the Lord speaks when he says, 'He who does so and teaches others to do so, this man will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.'

Origen's commentary is in line with Jesus teachings, "The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted." Jesus comes down harshest not just on hypocrisy in general, but religious hypocrisy. His call is the basic idiom, "Practice what you preach."

Interestingly enough, there is a section in the Gospels commonly called *The Seven Woes* in which Jesus cleverly and eloquently rebukes religious hypocrites. Strangely, *The Seven Woes*, never show up in the Revised Common Lectionary. It's almost as if the people who come up with the readings we hear didn't think we could handle it. Today, perhaps for the first time in this church, I offer you, Jesus' Seven Woes:

"But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves. 'Woe to you, blind guides, who say, "Whoever swears by the sanctuary is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gold of the sanctuary is bound by the oath." You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the sanctuary that has made the gold sacred? And you say, 'Whoever swears by the altar is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gift that is on the altar is bound by the oath.' How blind you are! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? So whoever swears by the altar, swears by it and by everything on it; and whoever swears by the sanctuary, swears by it and by the one who dwells in it; and whoever swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by the one who is seated upon it.

'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!

'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may become clean.

'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth. So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous, and you say, 'If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' Thus you testify against yourselves that you are descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your ancestors. You snakes, you brood of vipers! How can you escape being sentenced to hell? Therefore I send you prophets, sages, and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town, so that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. Truly I tell you, all this will come upon this generation.'

In all of these rebukes, Jesus forces one to look beyond the surface. "For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence." He asks us whether our heart is aligned with our actions; whether the piety we project reflects the piety within. "For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth. So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness." He is basically challenging us to embark on an introspective journey towards a life of complete integrity in thought, word, and deed.

What is the Good News in this great list of rebukes? Every preaching class tells you that you should focus on and make sure you are preaching the Good News. In the Twelve-Step Program, commonly used for those recovering from alcohol, drug, or other addictions, every person committed to the Twelve-Steps has a sponsor. The sponsor is an accountability partner who supports you in your journey towards wholeness. The Good News of today's lesson is that far from just being a peace-loving hippie, or nice guy, Jesus is there as our accountability partner, calling us towards wholeness of being, calling us out on the lame excuses we make, and inviting us into a deeper reality of being. Not only that, but Christ says, "I send you prophets, sages, and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town . . ." These prophets have come calling us to align that values we hold dear with the actions we endorse everyday. Such as Saint Francis calling us to heed Christ's words, "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." Then there's Martin Luther King Jr.'s *I Have a Dream* speech that points us towards recognition of the equality of all people in the eyes of God. If you ever visit St. Gregory of Nyssa Church in San Francisco, you will find Saint Francis and Reverend King painted around the walls and ceiling of the sanctuary along with dozens of other modern day prophets including Cesar Chavez, Thomas Merton, John Muir, Eleanor Roosevelt, Desmond Tutu, and many others. Prophets are still speaking, calling us to a change of heart, a change of being, and journey towards deeper integrity in word and deed? Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent and is a time for us to reflect again on the voices of the prophets in our midst.

We stand at the crossroads of a continued renewal of our lives, ongoing transformation, continued healing, and constant change as we spiritually grow. Today we will all be marked with ashes in the shape of a cross. The ashes signify our sinfulness, and the cross our redemption. The ashes

signify our mortality, and the cross our inheritance through Christ of eternal life. We stand in that place where the ashes of our lives meet the transformative, healing power of the cross as the path to Resurrection and new life. May we hear the voices of the prophets, and open our hearts to this desert journey of Lent.

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