

10 September 2017

Weightier Matters
Matthew 23:23-24

In Matthew 23, Jesus takes on the Jewish religious establishment. Point by point, he charges the religious leaders with doing more harm than good, beginning each point with the repeated phrase, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” Today we read just one of those indictments, from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 23, verses 23-24.

²³“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. ²⁴You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!”

Several years ago I attended a Stewardship Conference where one of the presenters noted that some churches seem to talk about nothing but how they need money to pay the utility bills. She said, “It’s as if paying the utilities is their mission statement.” That got me to thinking. Since the 80s, every church has had to have a mission statement, which is a good thing. It’s good to know what your purpose as a church is. But sometimes it feels as if a church’s *real* priorities – the things they actually talk about, spend money on, and identify themselves by – have little to do with their official statement. I began imagining what honest mission statements for some churches might be. For instance:

- *First Church: A Community That Pays Its Electricity Bill*

You get the idea? Maybe not so inspiring, but honest is good, right? Of course, other churches have different favorite topics of conversation. Here’s one:

- *First Church: We Used to Be Big*

It’s not just what people talk about, though. It’s about self-identity, how its members really think of it. How about these?

- *First Church: A Habitual Place to Be*
- *First Church: A Downtown Church That Isn’t Lutheran or Catholic*
- *First Church: Worth Putting Up With Until Your Kids Are Confirmed*

Sometimes the honest mission statement might move beyond self-identity and express the church’s *real* goals. How about this one?

- *First Church: God’s People on Pilgrimage Together toward 1953*

Of course, you would need to include the big new suburban contemporary churches in the list of honest mission statements:

- *First Community: We Have, Like, REALLY Big Screens*
- *First Community: A Church Big Enough to Hide In*

How about one more?

- *First Church: Doing All the Things Churches Usually Do, For Some Reason.*

Unfortunately, I can't laugh at that last one. That's probably the stealth mission statement of half the churches I've ever known – continuing to do all the things that they think churches are supposed to do, for no other reason than simply because they're *supposed* to. Many of you know Dan Dick, Assistant to our Bishop Jung. In an earlier stage of his ministry, he ran the United Methodist research bureau, and in that role he did an extended study of hundreds of United Methodist churches around the country, seeking to define what makes a vital congregation. One question he asked every church was: What would you say the purpose of the church is? Want to know what the most common response was? After a deer-in-the-headlights look that indicated that no one had ever asked them that before, people would say, “Well, you know, to be the church.” Not particularly insightful. And even less useful.

We can't afford that attitude in America today. In last week's sermon I mentioned the boom in church numbers that occurred in the 1950s. What I pointed out was that that sudden uptick correlated exactly with the expansion of the middle class, which isn't, you know, the most impressive reason for church growth, but at least people were here. And even if some were here for superficial reasons, some of them heard the gospel of love, and lives were transformed. But, as you may have noticed, that boom is over. Nationwide, church attendance has been in decline for over 60 years now. (You want to see the charts? I've got them in my office: every Pew Foundation Religious Survey, every sociological study of the church for the past decade.) The attendance boom of the 50s has been completely erased. Church attendance today has sunk to levels last seen in the early 1930s. For the first time in US history, the percentage of the population that describes itself as Protestant has dipped below 50%. Roman Catholics have held steady at about 23%, but only by means of immigration from Catholic countries. Without that, their numbers would have dropped even faster than those of Mainline Protestants, if you can imagine.

For a long time, the only Christian group that grew in numbers was the Conservative Evangelical branch of Christianity, which led many to conclude that church decline was the result of liberal theology. By this narrative, we Mainline types had compromised the faith and conformed to secular culture so much that we had driven people to churches that still stood for something. But in 2007, something happened: for the first time in anyone's memory the Evangelicals declined in numbers, too. And again in 2008. And again every year since then. It now appears that they're just late-comers to the same freefall that the rest of American Christianity has known. *Everybody's* losing members. In religious surveys, the only group showing any significant growth is the “Nones” – people who claim no religious affiliation. That's now close to 20% of the population as a whole. And, since the “Nones” represent 35% of the young adult population, it seems safe to guess this trend is going to continue.

Now a lot of people have a lot of (mostly conflicting) theories to explain the numerical decline of American Christianity, and so do I, but whatever the reason may be, this is our new context. The church is playing an increasingly marginal role in society. People moving to a new town don't automatically look for a church; it's no longer necessary for socialization or entertainment or youth activities or business contacts. More and more Americans are two or even three generations away from the last person in their family who attended church. We're no longer on most people's radar, and fewer and fewer people have any idea what we believe, or

what we do, or why. In another thirty years, half the churches in town will have been converted to restaurants or yoga studios or apartments or just leveled to make parking lots.

This is not a bad thing. Here's why I say that. The other half of the churches in town, the ones that have remained vital, will be the ones that have re-discovered the purpose and mission of the Church of Jesus Christ, who have given up the quest to return to something that the church used to be and instead have asked what the church is *supposed* to be. Now that we are no longer a foundational pillar of the American middle class – and we aren't any more – what are we?

This is the question Jesus was talking about in Matthew 23, in the passage you just heard. The leaders of Judaism, the scribes and the Pharisees, were maintaining the form of faith, meticulously obeying all the commandments, but they'd forgotten why. To take one example: the tithing laws of the Torah commanded people to bring ten percent of their produce to Jerusalem, then hold a feast with it and make sure that every widow and orphan and immigrant in the city was fed and cared for. That, in part, was *why* they were to tithe. But that last bit, the purpose bit, had been forgotten. By Jesus' day, the scribes and Pharisees were scrupulously tithing to the temple one out of every ten leaves in their herb gardens, while people were hungry in the streets outside. "You're doing the little stuff, but you've forgotten why," he told them. "You've neglected the *weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith*. Then, in one of his most memorable analogies, he says, "You're straining a gnat out of your soup, then swallowing a camel."

When the Pharisees lost sight of the "weightier matters" – the purpose behind the forms of faith – they became superficial, materialistic, self-important, and hypocritical. And throughout history, that pattern has repeated itself over and over in the Church. Every time the Church has gotten successful, in worldly terms – every time it has become wealthy and influential in society – it has lost its way and begun to worship the external forms of the Church and forgotten its purpose. It happened in the 4th century after Constantine, in the High Middle Ages and the Renaissance, in Victorian England, and amid 1950s American triumphalism. Nothing has ever been more dangerous to the Church than material success. When the Church has held a central place in society, the Kingdom of God has invariably been moved to the margins. So maybe now – now that the Church is being pushed to the margins of society – we can move Christ's stated priorities back to the center: justice, mercy, and faith.

So this is what we're going to do for the next month or so in our worship services. We're going to think together about why we're even here. Why is there a church? What are we supposed to be doing? And why are we supposed to be doing those things? I don't have those answers, just a few ideas and an outline for discussion. We're going to look, one by one, at things like worship and teaching, asking, "Should we be doing this? Why?" You're going to hear that question a lot: "Why?"

No, I'm not pushing for a new mission statement for the letterhead. The one we have – Christ-followers living God's love – is fine. I just want us to know what that means. What that entail? Why? And no, I do not expect this to bring massive changes in what we do. We will still have meetings. We still need to raise money to fix the boilers before the heating season. We'll still take pledges for next year. I'm pretty confident of that last one. But *we are* going to make sure that before we do those things we've thought about why. How do they fit into the purpose of the church? Why are we even here? Because if we can't answer that question, maybe we shouldn't be.

The time when we could just go through the motions of doing church is over. We're entering a new era, a day of considering weightier matters.