

## Keeping It Simple

Matthew 23:1-12     *The greatest among you will be your servant.  
All who exalt themselves will be humbled,  
and all who humble themselves will be exalted.*

Jesus criticizes the scribes and Pharisees for teaching things that they don't practice themselves. They tell other people how to live their lives without living that way themselves. They make things complicated and cumbersome, while Jesus points to a way that is simple, though not easy--the life devoted to loving God and neighbor. Paul Tillich said that Jesus was the end of religion. I think this was what he was talking about. If we get stuck in religion as forms, beliefs, and structures, we never get to spirituality—a real and vital relationship with the living God and a life of love. **Jesus is not about complexity and heaviness, but the light and easy yoke of a discipleship that brings us closer to God, others, and our true self.**

Have you heard the term “spiritual abuse”? These days we are becoming aware of the many ways we humans abuse each other. Spiritual abuse has to do with religious leaders, groups, and organizations manipulating people's spiritual searching and trust for some institutional or personal gain or to gain power in some way. Spiritual abuse fills people with guilt, making them dependent upon the organization or person, exploiting their resources, energies, their very lives. It is a real danger in religion, and even churches that think themselves above that sort of thing can fall into spiritual manipulation for the sake of the organization's survival. Jesus' words are a clear exposure and condemnation of spiritual abuse.

You ask people to do what you aren't willing to do yourselves, says Jesus. You manipulate people, keeping them away from the life God made them to live, the life of trusting faith and of love. You do your thing in order for people to admire you. It's an ego trip. Religion is a ladder you climb to reach the social, political, and religious elite, those with power. You like to be recognized in public and called “teacher,” “reverend,” “doctor.” Now, it is easy at this point to assume that Jesus is talking about other people, other religious groups. If we do that, we miss the deeper point Jesus is making. It has to do with any of us using religion or spirituality for self-promotion, so we feel somehow better than or different from others in some way. The very word Pharisee comes from a Greek word that means “to separate.” The Pharisees represented a spirituality of separateness, distinctiveness, individualism. This is using religion or spirituality to make ourselves separate from others. We can all get into that, if we are not mindful.

The Church of the Covenant has always held up the life of faith as one of commitment, needing spiritual practice or discipline. We simply say that to grow in faith, to move toward fulfilling the life God has given us, we need to incorporate a kind of order in our lives that nurtures such growth—daily prayer, reading of scripture, regular worship with the community, discerning and using our gifts, serving the community of faith itself or the wider world in some specific ministry we feel God has called us to, giving financially in a significant way to remind ourselves that all we have is from God and to increase our trust in God's providing for us. These are not complicated things, and though some resist them as burdensome, we understand that these simple spiritual practices have been part of any spiritual community that has taken God and our relationship to God seriously. We call this simply the “integrity of church membership,” that being a Christian means more than having our names on a church roll.

All of this is good and important. It is the reason I am here, you also. However, we can deceive ourselves. We can start **believing** that we are special or different, instead of **being** different by our living, by using the spiritual practices we take on to lead us into a real and vital relationship with the living God. We run the risk of asking others do something that we are not doing ourselves on a daily basis, something that is not a vital part of our own lives. The simplicity of the life of faith, with practices of prayer and service, or as we call it, the inward

journey and the outward journey, brings us into the reality of our relationship with the living God. But if we are not watchful, we can turn it into burden and complexity.

**Jesus is not about separateness, but community.** Competition feeds the ego, the smaller self. First, Jesus says that the greatest among you will be your servant. The big shot is really the little shot. The person who is greatest in terms of spirituality is the one who may not even be conscious of being “spiritual.” The one who is truly distinctive in her love of God and people is the one who may not even be aware of it as anything special, who is just doing what she has come to know in her heart is right and true for human beings. Community cannot be created on the basis of ego competition and ego feeding. Community, in Jesus’ view, comes about as each of us experiences the dying of the small self and the resurrection of the large self, the true self that is in love with God, with the world as God’s creation, and with people as brothers and sisters in God’s love. When we are on that path, that kind of dying and rising, the things that once made us feel important or special don’t mean anything any longer. We are finding a whole new awareness. We are growing into community, finding our horizons expanding every day to embrace more of the world. It simply doesn’t feel good any more to be pursuing ego needs and satisfactions, making others dependent upon us or being dependent upon them. We don’t have to use others to get what we want, and we are learning how to not let others use us. We stop demanding that others, that the community mirror of our own view of things. We stop talking about the importance of diversity and start learning to really live with people who are different from us, not only by race, gender, or socio-economic position, but also because they have a different view of things than we have or we simply find them irritating. In this, we are becoming persons who can love genuinely and freely, without ulterior motives and manipulations. We stop laying burdens on others and increasingly live our own lives as faithful persons. We break our addiction to competition and find the freedom of community.

The second thing Jesus says that replaces competition with community is that the one who humbles herself will be exalted, and the one who exalts himself will be humbled. Simple as that. If we are trying to lift ourselves up, make ourselves important, focusing on getting our identity through being better than or different from others, then we are going to fall flat. It simply never works, at least not for long. The path to self-fulfillment and our true identity is to discover and live out of our place within the whole fabric of creation. That includes our relationships with others in community. Elaine Prevallet writes: *To have the sense of ‘being where one belongs, doing what one is given to do’ is one of the most liberating experiences of life, and one of life’s greatest blessings [Toward a Spirituality of Global Justice: A Call to Kinship, p. 113].* When we are all doing that, the thing works! Life works as God made it to work. Elaine is not saying that we are to “stay in our places,” the way that phrase has been used to oppress people. True humility—a word meaning literally “of the earth” [*humus*]—means knowing what is ours to be and to do and what is not ours, being true to our own gifts and callings and not abandoning them because something looks more important or gets more attention. When we are humbling ourselves in this way, no longer addicted to what people will think of us, no longer trying to run others’ lives, but affirming and paying attention to our own lives, then we experience the kind of elevation Jesus is talking about. When we are discovering and being increasingly faithful to who we really are, who God made us to be, then we experience the kind of “high” that you can’t get in any other way. It is the experience of being in harmony with God, others, and our true selves. That’s true humility.

One more thing I want to share out of my reflections on this passage during the week. Jesus did not hate the scribes and Pharisees, and not all of them were guilty of the stuff Jesus was criticizing. Jesus admired and appreciated their devotion to the scriptures and traditions of the faith. His words may well have come out of his compassion for them, granted a hard sort of compassion. I thought about religious leaders, being one myself, though often with bouts of reluctance and bewilderment! The church can make it difficult, complicated, and burdensome for people who come simply seeking to love God and neighbor, to live the life of faith. This is also true for clergy. The structures get complicated. Institutions pressure leaders to work for their survival. People often perceive the church and the minister as there simply to meet their

own needs, not as means for them to respond to Christ's call in their own lives. It's easy to get lost in all of that, to get out of touch with what you as a person are called by God to do.

Just prior to the unfolding of events that led me here to serve with you, I was at the end of my rope. After nearly thirty years, I was ready to give it all up and find another way to be faithful to the gifts God had given me. Then I was called here, to a community that has from the beginning lifted up the importance of practicing what is taught, of discovering and living out of the reality of our relationship with God and Christ's call to follow him. The Church of the Covenant has endeavored to be on the side of simplicity, not complications, freedom, not burdens, and community, not competition. I am grateful for this, for these things are also offered to and expected of your minister. Whether it was Bev Cosby or now me, it is important that your minister model in his or her own life the things we talk about and lift up as important.

When I met with the Covenant Members to explore my coming here, we talked about my taking time regularly to devote to music, not outside of my job, as it were, but as part of my calling. This I have been able to do. At least, when I have not given time to it, it is my own fault, not yours! I have also been able to give the time necessary to follow God's call to establish a place for community in the central city, the Festival Center. This was part of my vision for us as a community, that we would have a presence with people and in a neighborhood that can keep us in touch with what it means to be black and poor in this city. Following this call has taught me in a deeper way than ever before what it truly means to live by faith, to seek each day what God is calling me to do, and to trust that if I am being faithful and responsible in the things I am given to do, then God will bring about what God envisions for the missions that are put in our hearts and minds. Because of the past two years of endeavoring to be faithful to this call, we are seeing the continuing unfolding of a place for community, a place where we can be present with the people of the College Hill neighborhood, where barriers can be overcome, where mutual understanding can grow, and where we can join together in the life of the kingdom of God.

All of us, religious leaders included, need to know the blessings that come from practicing what we teach and preach, of living out our faith, of discovering and using the gifts God has given us. That is what we are seeking, why we are here, to find a life of faith, not entanglements in things that don't matter, things that keep us from knowing the nearness of God, sensing God's spirit nudging us toward our true selves and empowering us to offer what we have in the service of life. The way of Jesus is simple, though not easy. We as the Church of the Covenant need to always keep an awareness of this and ask ourselves at each juncture: Are we veering off into complexity and burden? Are we moving away from or making clearer for others and ourselves this simplicity? If we are keeping that kind of awareness, then we will be practicing what we teach, and then teaching, offering to others, what we are actually practicing. We sang it well enough just a few minutes ago in the words of the beloved Shaker hymn:

*'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free,  
'tis the gift to come down where we ought to be,  
and when we find ourselves in the place just right,  
'twill be in the valley of love and delight.*