

October 30, 2011 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

Giving Attention to Our Own Lives

Matthew 23:1-12 *But you are not to be called rabbi...*

Jesus is teaching his disciples and others who have gathered around. He has harsh words for the scribes and Pharisees, the religious leaders of the day. They hold authority and responsibility for passing on the teachings of Israel's faith and giving guidance to the people. They are abusing that authority, and Jesus judges them to be hypocritical, unjust, and self-serving. They love the prestige and power of their positions. They place the full load of religious law on people, while giving themselves plenty of wiggle room. What they teach, they do not practice. They love parading around in religious garb and receiving preferential treatment. Jesus holds nothing back when it comes to those who are supposed to be religious leaders.

However, Jesus does not leave it there. Everything in this teaching, to my mind, hinges on two words right in the middle of it: "But you...." Jesus could have gone on and on about the woeful behavior of others, and I'm certain that his disciples and the others listening to him that day would love it. There is nothing that feels much better than criticizing others, especially those who deserve it! There is something delicious about seeing all that is wrong with everyone else. It lifts our spirits, in a kind of twisted way, right? Makes us feel righteous about ourselves. Religion can be very good about making us feel that we are right and others are wrong. Yet, it goes beyond religion to plain everyday psychology—it just feels good to find fault with others. But the feeling is only a temporary distraction from dealing with ourselves, our own lives.

With those two little words--"But you...."--Jesus brings it home to you and me, to our own lives. Okay, those other folks are hypocrites and posers. They are

pretentious and ego-centered. But me...what about MY life? In the end, we can really do little, if anything, about everyone else. Yet we can do a whole lot about ourselves, about who we are and how we live. And that is what Jesus is always getting at.

You, says Jesus, are not to call each other rabbi. You only have one teacher and you are all students, learners, disciples. One translation puts it “you are all friends.” You have only one Father, your heavenly one. In the end, the greatest among you is the one who is a servant, who is mindful of the common good. And those who exalt themselves, who are seeking recognition and prestige, will find only emptiness. When we find humility, however, we see our own lives within the context of the whole, of the community. That is what truly exalts us and gives us deepest fulfillment. It is always the same spiritual struggle, getting beyond the smaller self, the ego, to the larger Self, the image of God in which we are created.

Jesus consistently warns us of competition, comparison, and judgment. Such things lead to unhappiness and hurt. Jesus always brings us back to ourselves, our own lives and how we are living them. That is where we can do something. That is where we can find power and love and hope. If we are trying to change everyone else, we feel hopeless. If we are working with ourselves, we find hope. I have found this to be a basic insight in the major religious traditions. The real change, the real hope, the real power of life and love happens when we are working with our own lives. This is why the inward journey is so important. That is where we can look patiently and gently at our preoccupation with others and what they are or are not being or doing, and get insight into it. What is this teaching me about myself? What is this showing me that I must let go of? And when we do that, we find the way of letting it go and giving fuller attention to what we are called and gifted to do. We can discover and grow in our capacity for the kind of selflessness Jesus talks about, finding our lives within the context of the whole of life. We begin to see more and more who we are and what we have to

give to enrich the whole, to serve life around us. When we are on that journey, we find that it is the way of deep joy and happiness. We become increasingly free from our desire to measure and judge others. Our source of happiness becomes not how we measure ourselves in relation to others, but the fuller living of our own lives.

So, let's take some time this morning to talk with each other about this story, these teachings of Jesus, and what they say and mean to us.

Do I have a tendency to be critical of others? How does this make me feel? Where does this come from within myself?

How do I feel when I am able to stop and look at my own life, and begin to work with my own inward and outward life? Is this hard for me? Does it scare me? Does it feel better in some way?

There is a teaching of the Buddha(*The Dhammapada*): "Do not give your attention to what others do or fail to do; give it to what you do or fail to do." Discuss this in light of the reading from Matthew and your own life and experience.