

When Less is More: Less Image - More Substance

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Matt 23:23-27

“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 and of the plate, 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 are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of uncleanness. Matthew 23:23-27 (NRSV)

Join me in prayer: O God, open us up in this moment, for this time. Open our eyes that we might see the world through your eyes and our ears that we might hear your word in the midst of these words, and open our hearts, God, that we might feel compassion. Then, O Lord, open our hands that we might serve. Amen.

This summer Dee and I had the opportunity to go with 50 of our closest friends to Oberammergau for the Passion Play. This happens every ten years, and it was supposed to happen in 2020, but Covid postponed it. We had a great time, made new friends, and it was really neat. Here's the way it works. In Oberammergau, the village puts on this play once every ten years, and there are about two and a half hours in the afternoon, and then there's a 2-hour break for dinner, and then there are two and a half hours afterward for the completion of the play. It's all in German with classical music.

During the break, one of our members said to me, in describing the Jesus in the Passion Play. “This Jesus is different.” “How?” I asked. She said, “Well, he just seems really angry.” Then we got into a wonderful conversation about whether he was angry or just sounded angry since it was all in German. And everything you say in German sounds angry.

But the truth was that this Jesus really was angry. They compressed all the controversy of his life into this last week of his life. So, there's lots of pulling and conflict.

In the Scripture that we read today; Jesus is angry. They're called the "Woes." We hear a lot about the beatitudes. "Blessed are you when you mourn, for you will be comforted...Blessed are you when you hunger and thirst for righteousness ... Blessed are the poor..." This picture of blessedness, of happiness. And how it's flipped upside down in the Kingdom of God.

The "Woes" are sometimes interpreted as curses. Like if the Beatitudes are blessings, then "Woes" are curses. But I think that's a misinterpretation. What he's saying is that this will bring you woe. He's like a parent expressing grief on a wayward child, saying, "Do you not know what you're doing to your life? And to the life of others? Do you not understand? This is going to bring grief." And it's an expression of the pain that comes from a certain way of living. What I want us to think about is why we continue to do things that bring us woe. Why do we keep doing things that lead to grief in our lives? Why don't we just say "Whoa" to those things that bring us woe?

This whole series is from a book called *Subtract*, and it's by Leidy Klotz. It's full of things that if you took them out, then things get better. I shared with you last week this illustration about a Lego tower that you could fix by either adding three Lego bricks on one side or subtracting three Lego bricks on the other side. And 90% of the people add three Legos. We don't want to take things out; we want to add them. We have a propensity just to keep adding. It would be so much better if we just took them out.

Here's another example the author shares. That the early Neanderthals would use a big stone as a tool, and they'd hammer with it. They'd hammer using the stone. But as they developed higher-level thinking, they realized that if they chipped away parts of that rock, it would be more effective. So, they'd chip away at the rock to make it sharp, so they could use it in a more effective way, and when we chip away at things from our lives, it gets more effective.

Michelangelo said that he would look at a block of marble and would think of an angel, and he would chip away everything that didn't look like an angel. What if we could chip away everything in our lives that doesn't look like Jesus? Just subtract them.

The Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu said that "To gain knowledge you add things every day; to gain wisdom, you subtract things every day." It's a different spirit.

Here's what I want us to ask is what can we subtract and last week, we said, you know we have this drive for possessions that just overcomes us. It can begin to take over our lives. So, what if we let go of that to allow our lives to be filled with things that matter?

Today I want to use the same kind of picture and say, "What if we did away with – or limited – our need for approval? Our sense of desire for the right image. Of worrying about what the neighbors think. Or trying to portray ourselves as something and quit worrying about that. What difference might that make in our lives?"

I want to propose two ways we can do that. Two things we can aim at. The first is that we have less of a focus on image and more of a focus on what's going on inside us. On the heart. I call this "Doing Core exercises." The trainers tell us we must work on the core – the center. So that's true for us as human beings that we must work on what's at our core and not what's skin deep.

Listen to the Scriptures. This is his criticism of the Pharisees, "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 Pharisees! First clean the inside of the cup and of the plate, so that the outside also may become clean. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you're like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful but inside are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of uncleanness." (Matthew 23:25-27).

Oo, man! At the beginning of that same chapter Matthew 23, he's talking about the Pharisees, and he says, "They do all their deeds to be seen by others, for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces." (Matthew 23:5-7). And to have people call them "Pastor." (Not really; it says, "Rabbi.")

Between services, I got a text message from someone who said, "I believe we are all recovering Pharisees." Maybe so. Pastors too. We care about what others think.

Now I want to be clear with you. Everybody cares about what people think. We are supposed to care what others think. You can't do away with that. We are made to be herd animals; we live in a herd of people. We are social animals. We are not lone wolves. We are to be in community with others, and there are to be social norms that we are to follow. That's appropriate. I've said before that only people who don't care about what others think are called sociopaths. And we don't want to be those.

The issue is what happens when they begin to push everything else out. What happens when they begin to be our North Star? What everyone thinks of me begins to be the thing that drives what I'm doing. And it isn't kept in its proper place. Last week we talked about how possessions are fine; it's okay to have possessions. That makes sense. But they've got to be put in a place where they are subservient to what God wants for us. So that's true of our desire to be liked.

Let's talk about social media for a moment. Here's how the algorithms for Facebook and Instagram work. They are designed to feed into our need for approval or validation. They are made that way. So that if I post something a picture or a saying or a comment or something, then people can "like" it. I guess this works for Twitter, too? You can "like" it, and if you "like" it, you see it, and then you say, "They like it." And all the evidence shows that it releases this little bit of approval dopamine in your head that makes you think, "Oh, yeah. I'm good." And here's what's so crazy about it. If you get a lot of "likes," like dozens or hundreds of people saying, "I like it," they will hold back some of those "likes." The algorithm holds them back until there's a period when you don't have any "likes," and then it gives them to you. So that you'll keep coming back seeing the advertisements and spending the money. All of that is designed to feed into your needs to be liked.

Here's the other way it works. That if you click on something, or if you "like" something, then it says, "Oh, that's what he likes, so let's give him more of that. Give him more of what he likes." So soon, whatever ideas or beliefs you have or however you view the world, everyone seems to agree with you. Because they say, "Oh, yeah!" It continues to feed that need for validation.

Now, this is a little weird because I'm not on social media. And here's why. I wish it were because of this, but it's because I'm lazy. I can't even return all my emails, so I can't figure out how I would keep up with social media. But it's also because I'm self-aware enough to know that I'm really thin-skinned and that I don't want that to be the thing that I'm worried about all the time. It has to be mitigated, controlled, or limited in some way in my life.

Social media is wonderful, don't misunderstand me. It's done incredible things for the world. People who are separated can stay connected and with friends from far away. There are all sorts of wonderful things about it. I'm not saying it's evil. What I am saying is that you have

to be careful. Last week when we talked about possessions, it said, “Be on your guard.” Well, I will tell you – be on your guard against that sense of “I’ve got to be liked.”

Here’s what we know. The idea of social media is as old as time itself, and that’s why Jesus speaks of the Pharisees. Where he says, “All they’re worried about is what people think.” So, what are we going to do instead? Well, I think we must do our core exercises. We’ve got to do the things that feed us inside so that we don’t have this hunger and thirst for people to tell us we’re awesome. We must feed our souls; we have to cleanse that inside of the cup. You know the core exercises – first, there’s prayer. You pray, every day, maybe pray five times a day. Pray and stay in constant conversation with God who loves you and tells you that God loves you regardless of what others think of you. Read the Scriptures – it’s a love letter from God telling you that you were created at the top of creation. That you were made in God’s image. That you are incredibly special. That you’re God’s beloved. Feed your heart with that. Be self-reflective enough to keep a journal. Or to reflect on what’s going on inside you.

When something happens, what happens in our hearts? Create a list of values that every morning you can look at. And then you say, “This is what I believe. These are things that I believe are most important. That God has put in my heart to be the driver. I’ve read Scripture and I’ve studied. These are things that I believe I’m called to be. And that’s what I’m going to be today regardless of what others tell me. This is who I’m going to be.”

There’s another illustration or metaphor that I think is really helpful for us. And that’s where Paul talks about being rooted. That you put down roots and those roots are fed by what’s underground, what’s not seen instead of what’s seen. One thing you might do is this. Every day read this passage from Ephesians 3. Maybe memorize it. “I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.” You’ve put your roots down into God’s love and let that give you sustenance. It continues: “I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled all the fullness of God.” (Ephesians 3:16-19). To feed the inside.

That's the first thing. The second movement that I hope we'll take hold of is that if we can worry less, subtract our desire for approval and our need for the right image. The need for respect from others. And fill it instead with substance – actually doing something.

Last weekend when I preached, I might have been a little groggy because Dee and I had the opportunity to go with church friends to the Garth Brooks concert on Saturday night. It was great! What an entertainer! I didn't know people could scream for 3 hours without stopping – the whole time! I thought, "This is crazy!" I was surprised how many Garth Brooks songs I know, and I didn't know how many of them I knew. I thought of you people when I sang, "I've got friends in low places..." "I thought of all of you." "We're together." Though I don't think the whiskey drowns or the beer chasers are here. But that's okay.

We had a great time, and I got to look around at the attire. I had my cowboy boots on. I don't have Wranglers, so I had to put on Levi's, which was the best I could do. Dee and I had a big debate about whether I should wear the giant belt buckle that my father-in-law gave me. I did not because I felt that wouldn't be authentic to be wearing it around. So, I'm looking around at what others were wearing. There were some high patent leather boots that one young lady was wearing. There were blue jeans with creases down the front and interesting hats. As I'm looking at all of that, I was thinking to myself, "I bet most of these people do not own even one cow. Not even one single cow." How can you be a cowboy without a *cow*? You have to own a cow to be a cowboy, at least one cow. Don't you if you're going to be a cowboy? But no, most of them didn't.

Between services, someone told me that there is a program with the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo where you can buy a cow. You don't have to do anything with it; you just pay for it. Then you can own a cow, and you can be a real cowboy; I guess that's how that works. But maybe being a cowboy is just a mindset. Maybe it's just a mindset or even a lifestyle. You listen to country music, wear the gear, and drive a truck. It's a mindset.

That may be true of being a cowboy, but it is not true of the Christian faith. It's not just a mindset; it's not just language that you use where you quote Jesus' words and all of that. There has to be something of substance. It's a way of acting. "Faith without works is dead."

When I first came to St. Luke's as the pastor, I went to see a man who I had great respect for. He was willing to talk to me about his experience. He was at another large church in the city in an affluent neighborhood. I said, "So what's the hardest thing about serving a church in this

kind of neighborhood in this kind of community? Sort of the big-time.” He thought for a minute and said, “People who wear their Christian faith like it’s jewelry.” I thought about that. Stung a little bit, actually. I wonder how where with many of us, it’s on the outside of us, but there’s no real substance, or action, or life to it.

Listen to what the Scripture says. This is the criticism of the Pharisees from Matthew 23:4-7:” They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others, but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.” (Matthew 23:4). They won’t do anything of substance.

I was so proud on Thursday when we broke ground on the Community Center at our Gethsemane campus at Gulfton and Sharpstown. I thought of how much that’s like the DNA of this church. That we don’t just want to make a point, we want to actually make a difference. We want to do something that’s substantive, that makes a change. That makes a difference in the lives of others. And I thought as we broke ground that this building, when it’s done, is really going to make a difference in the lives of teenagers.

I thought about when St. Luke’s founded the Amazing Place and the difference that has made in the lives of people who deal with early, mild, or moderate dementia.

On Labor Day, Katie Montgomery Mears is going to be preaching about suicide. It’s a one-time sermon between series. She’s been working with the Nick Finnegan Counseling Center on how we can provide resources and help people grapple with this issue. I thought about what St. Luke’s said, “No, let’s create a place for people to actually get help, to make a difference.” So, the Nick Finnegan Counseling Center was created. I thought about Christian Community Service Center as we try to actually make a difference in the lives of others. It’s all about trying to do something of substance.

Let’s think about what it would be like if we throttled back our concern about what others think and focused instead on what we can actually do to make a difference. In January of this year, a man was driving through Roan County, Tennessee – his name is Brodie Roberts. He was a young man, and he was on his way to meet a friend at a gym on a Sunday. It was freezing cold in January in Tennessee, there was a winter storm warning, and there was snow on the ground. He was driving down the slick road, and he came across a group of cars that had pulled off to the side of the road. He pulled up, unrolled the window, and asked what was going on. A man said, “A car has driven off, slipped off the road down into that lake over there.” Brodie Roberts got

out of his car and went down. He said, “Is there anyone still in the car?” One person is on the phone calling 911, and everyone else is standing around talking. They said, “Yes, there’s a lady still in the car.” So, he took off his parka and his shoes, and he jumped into the frigid water. He used his feet to open the door. He said that as soon as he did that, her hands came out, so he knew she was still alive. He said, “I was able to get her seatbelt unbuckled and pull her out the door and bring her to the surface.” And as she took her gulp of air and he took his he said, “You’re okay. We’re going to make it. Let’s go to the bank.” So, he did, and they wrapped her up. He said he’d never been so cold any time as he was that time. I thought to myself, “I wonder what I’d do? I’d probably be paralyzed there on the bank, thinking, ‘What should I do?’”

As an analogy to what it’s like to be a follower of Jesus, it feels to me that it’s not just feeling about being worried about something or talking about something. It’s about a certain way of behaving that can actually make a difference in the life of someone else. To carry the Gospel of love to them and to make it tangible.

If we could just throttle back our concern, our uproar about things. And instead, say, “What can I do in someone’s life to make a real difference? Substance - not image?”

O God, we confess that we are recovering Pharisees in a way. We do want to be followers of your Son Jesus, but sometimes it’s sort of skin deep. We worry about what others think, and we have that need to be liked and approved. We ask that you just feed that spot in us with your love. Feed that place where we know we’re loved, where we know that you made us with value when we’re secured in that so that we might choose to live as you have taught us to live and to seek to really make a difference in the lives of someone else. In the name of Christ, we pray. Amen.