

Mundane in the Membrane
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
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Matthew 23:1-12
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In today's lection, and indeed throughout the whole of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus laments the ever-evolving and ever-expanding bureaucracy of religious leadership. Long ago, the law of Moses had been developed to help people recognize, respect, and celebrate the power and presence of God in the world. But over the years, the Tabernacle became a Temple, and the law developed tradition, and an institution emerged, and its power kept growing. And before long, the Jerusalem Temple and its leadership spent too much time worrying about how to wield institutional power, and not enough time worrying about how to make known God's power.

So what did that look like? It meant you would find learned men who could recite every verse of scripture with eloquence, and perform every detailed ritual with precision. But that expertise was empty. Because while they taught folks that it was unacceptable to deny a neighbor his/her cloak, they spent an awful lot of time making sure their long robes were tailored just right. And while they spent an awful lot of time telling folks to help feed the hungry, when the dinner bell rang, they sprinted for the seat of honor, and they weren't too concerned about who else had a place at the table. And while they knew that love of God and love of neighbor were ideas that should carry primacy in their lives, man it sure felt good to be well-regarded in public, and noticed by the big-wigs.

Long story short, too many religious leaders valued the institution over God and God's people. And the real work of God – the love for and service of others – took a backseat to the not-nearly-as-important work of the institution.

So Jesus says, "Listen to what they say. They're telling you good stuff. But don't pay so much attention to their application, or actually their lack of application. Because Torah is nothing but words if it's not applied in a spirit of love and service.

It's funny. I'm not convinced that the disciples heeded Jesus' instructions that day, but it does appear that some of his lesser known followers did. We're told in Acts that Peter and James and John, and the other Apostles became pretty busy when the earliest church began. After all, they had an institution to build, and they were really swamped with the application of spiritual gifts. There was concern among the church that needs of the widows were being neglected --- there were hungry people to be fed, and the church needed servants to make that happen. Stephen, one of the earliest saints, if not the first, was chosen along with six others to be table servants.

Frank Stagg writes:

It is ironical that those who were too busy to with "spiritual matters" to "serve tables" failed to provide the deeper insights into the gospel. The twelve were slow to see that with God there is no "respect of persons." Stephen and the others were mundane enough to be assigned to this table-serving job, but somehow they developed the keenest insights into the gospel and provided the leadership for a Christianity truly spiritual rather than legal, embracing humanity rather than a nation." (Stagg 1955)

And it's because of Stephen, and people like him, that the church we know now is open to Jew and Gentile alike, and is rooted in the idea of service to one another. It is a place where the greatest among us are servants.

On this All Saints Sunday, we remember nearly four-dozen saints of Sardis. And I can't help but wonder: How many gallons of sweet tea did they make for the people in this room? How many casseroles did they bring to grieving families or new mamas and daddies? How many teenagers did they drive on buses or vans to beach or mountain retreats? How many leaves did they rake out from underneath those Sardis oaks? How many garbage cans did they haul out to the curb? How many committee meetings did they endure to see a church campus and a staff and a congregation made a tangible reality? I can't help but wonder, how many seemingly mundane things did these four dozen saints do for us?

And I can't help but think: Thanks to be God for every one of those ordinary, mundane, humble acts of service.

Because here's what I think Jesus was telling those listeners in the Temple, and what he's still telling us today: The presence and power of God are not found in hemlines, or spotlights, or places of honor, or public-address announcements. The presence and power of God are found in ordinary acts of service. When we love one another; when we break bread with one another – that's the making and baking and serving and eating and cleaning up together; when we simply share the rhythms and routines of life with one another; we discover the gifts and talents and divine sparks of the people among us – We discover the spirit of God in the world.

Those women and men who have gone before us – they knew that the seat of honor is really the stance of the servant; they knew that short robes are better than long ones, because your hands and feet need to be active; they knew that best greeting is communal – “How good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters dwell together in unity!”

Our saints listened to the words of the scribes, but they emulated the actions of the Christ.

And because they did, we can follow a slightly revised set of instructions, one I think Jesus would approve of: Listen to what those saints said, but also, do as they did.

For if we do, I think we'll experience a power and presence of God that is anything but mundane.

May it be so. Amen.

Sources:

Stagg, Frank. 1955. *The Book of Acts: The Early Struggle for an Unhindered Gospel*. Nashville, TN: Broadman Press.