

“Pearls Before Swine”

Matthew 7: 1-14; 21-29

To be honest, it feels like for the third week in a row, I’m standing up here before you, saying the same thing. Or if I’m being completely honest, saying the same thing week after week, things like grace and love are the values which should guide our words and our actions, things like living in community is hard but that is what we are called to do and not just with people who look like us and think like us. We are called to be in community with all of God’s people.

Week after week, it feels like I say the same thing, things like, as people of faith, we are called to reach across the boundaries this world uses to separate and divide. We are called to reach across these boundaries so that all can come together as one. I feel like I’m saying the same things week after week, things like as disciples of Christ, we are called to view people as beloved children of God, not as commodities to be used and abused.

At some point, it all starts to get repetitive. It just becomes background noise to our everyday lives. Not exactly what the preacher wants. Rather, my hope is that one day, I will have worked myself out of a job because we as humanity finally get it. We get what it means to be people of peace, to be people of justice, to be people

of mercy. We finally get what it means to be in community, in relationship with one another.

But instead, what I am finding is that regardless of the decline in religious institutions, I have job security more than ever. As we look at our communities, our nation, our world, it seems like it is more broken than ever before...name-calling, fighting, bullying and these are adults I'm referring to when it comes to this type of behavior.

Please hear me say that I know I am preaching to the choir. All of us are here because at some point, we had an encounter with the Risen Christ which changed us, which transformed us, which helped us realize that there is another way to be. But please also hear me say that I don't want to get into an us verses them mentality either. I know that there are lots of people who don't go to church who also believe in a vision of a better now for all people while there are plenty of people in the church who continue to turn a blind eye to the hurt and hate around them.

As I have lived with this text this past week, I had the thought of just reading our Scripture and then sitting back down again because there really is nothing that I can add to it. It is all there in black and white, or red if you are reading the red letter edition. Jesus is pretty clear on who we are to be as his followers. Jesus is

pretty clear on what we are called to do as ones who represent the Body of Christ here on Earth. From beginning to end, Jesus' Sermon the Mount, of which our text wraps up, from beginning to end of this section, Jesus invites us to struggle with, to discern, to be challenged by the very question of: What does it mean for us as disciples to live a life shaped, to live a life grounded in the Kingdom of God?

Again, I offer these words from the Gospel of Matthew, this time from the Message version: Don't pick on people, jump on their failures, criticize their faults— unless, of course, you want the same treatment. That critical spirit has a way of boomeranging. It's easy to see a smudge on your neighbor's face and be oblivious to the ugly sneer on your own. Do you have the nerve to say, 'Let me wash your face for you,' when your own face is distorted by contempt? It's this whole traveling road-show mentality all over again, playing a holier-than-thou part instead of just living your part. Wipe that ugly sneer off your own face, and you might be fit to offer a washcloth to your neighbor.

⁶“Don't be flip with the sacred. Banter and silliness give no honor to God. Don't reduce holy mysteries to slogans. In trying to be relevant, you're only being cute and inviting sacrilege.

⁷⁻¹¹“Don't bargain with God. Be direct. Ask for what you need. This isn't a cat-and-mouse, hide-and-seek game we're in. If your child asks for bread, do you trick him with sawdust? If he asks for fish, do you scare him with a live snake on his plate? As bad as you are, you wouldn't think of such a thing. You're at least decent to your own children. So don't you think the God who conceived you in love will be even better?

¹²“Here is a simple, rule-of-thumb guide for behavior: Ask yourself what you want people to do for you, then grab the initiative and do it for *them*. Add up God's Law and Prophets and this is what you get.

¹³⁻¹⁴“Don't look for shortcuts to God. The market is flooded with surefire, easygoing formulas for a successful life that can be practiced in your spare

time. Don't fall for that stuff, even though crowds of people do. The way to life—to God!—is vigorous and requires total attention.

“Knowing the correct password—saying ‘Master, Master,’ for instance— isn’t going to get you anywhere with me. What is required is serious obedience— *doing* what my Father wills. I can see it now—at the Final Judgment thousands strutting up to me and saying, ‘Master, we preached the Message, we bashed the demons, our God-sponsored projects had everyone talking.’ And do you know what I am going to say? ‘You missed the boat. All you did was use me to make yourselves important. You don’t impress me one bit. You’re out of here.’

²⁴⁻²⁵ “These words I speak to you are not incidental additions to your life, homeowner improvements to your standard of living. They are foundational words, words to build a life on. If you work these words into your life, you are like a smart carpenter who built his house on solid rock. Rain poured down, the river flooded, a tornado hit—but nothing moved that house. It was fixed to the rock.

²⁶⁻²⁷ “But if you just use my words in Bible studies and don’t work them into your life, you are like a stupid carpenter who built his house on the sandy beach. When a storm rolled in and the waves came up, it collapsed like a house of cards.”

²⁸⁻²⁹ When Jesus concluded his address, the crowd burst into applause. They had never heard teaching like this. It was apparent that he was living everything he was saying—quite a contrast to their religion teachers! This was the best teaching they had ever heard.

Our text ends this way because what the crowd realized that day and what we as modern day disciples have come to understand is that to “hear Jesus’s words is to be grasped by them, to be reshaped by them, to be activated to obey them, to be set by them on a journey of transformation.” To hear Jesus’ words is to incorporate them into our lives, allowing them to guide our actions, to guide our

words because the simple fact of the matter is it matters what we do as people of faith. We are part of the Body of Christ here on Earth. We are the one who will introduce people to the Kingdom of God in their midst. And if our words, if our actions are full of hate and hurt, if our words and actions separate and divide rather than bringing people together, we are giving the wrong impression of God.

The very character of our God is loving and gracious, steadfast from generation to generation and as the people of God our words, our actions need to reflect what we already know to be true....that God loves us more than we could ever imagine and that all are welcome and invited to the Table as God's beloved children.

These words which Jesus offered that day, which are offered to us today have the power to effect change. They are words of power and hope. They are words which show us time and time again that the only response we have to God's gracious faithfulness is to offer up our entire being, heart, mind and soul, and allow these words to take root into our very selves so that all may know the presence of the Kingdom of God.

Because what it all boils down to is that faith is not measured in religious activity. Faith is not about us. It is not about making us better than everyone else. Faith has been, is now, and forever will be about knowing this world will not have

the last word. It is about the light of God becoming incarnate in our lives. Faith is about becoming the people God created and calls us to be...people of love, people of grace, people of mercy.

Or let me say it this way...This past Wednesday, I headed over to Locally Grown, our community youth group, hoping to get an idea of what they needed before they transitioned to meeting here next month. I thought I would be helping out but instead, I gained something. That night, I watched as youth prayed over one another, offering up their worries, their fears, their joys, offering up what's going on in their lives to one another, trusting each other to listen, to be offer support, to walk this journey with them. It was humbling and beautiful all together in that moment, to know that the youth of our community have a space to grow and learn, have a space to experience God's grace in their lives, have a space to for their faith to take root.

I left there on Wednesday night feeling hope, realizing that while us adults may have lost our way, our future is in very good hands because the youth, they get it.... They get what it means to be people of peace, to be people of justice, to be people of mercy. They get what it means to be in community, in relationship with one another. They get what it means to be part of the Body of Christ here on Earth.

Maybe it's time we adults took a lesson from these youth and begin practicing what we preach. May it be so. Amen.