

“ENGAGING THE WORLD, FOR THE GOOD OF ALL”

Isaiah 58:6-12; Matthew 23:1-12, 23

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Some of you know that I have an herb garden. I grow quite a few different herbs, including mint and dill. Not cumin. I've never seen cumin plants in a garden center around here and don't think it would grow well in our climate... but mint and dill and a lot of other herbs do. I'm always glad to share – because generally have a lot more oregano, chives, thyme, and several other herbs than I can use –but it's never really occurred to me to donate, on a regular basis, ten per cent of the herbs I harvest. Can you imagine it? Weighing out the parsley flakes, counting little bundles of chives and basil, finding somebody who wants lemon verbena? It seems much too fiddly, time-consuming, and ultimately probably not a very helpful way to contribute to the community.

But that's what the religious leaders in Jesus' community were reputed to do. Not only with herbs, of course, but with whatever their work produced. Tithing - giving ten percent of one's income – was a practice that for faithful Jews expressed their gratitude to God, a recognition that everything they had ultimately was God's gift. It was a sign of devotion. And those who were really, really scrupulous about applying the practice to *every* part of their work demonstrated the seriousness of their commitment. It might seem excessive to apply it to the clump of mint or the dill plants in the garden, but you can't deny that there's a real intentionality about this. A kind of “faithfulness in the little things.”

But it doesn't impress Jesus as much as it perhaps does some other folks. Now, we should note that Jesus doesn't actually object to tithing out of one's herb garden, or any other resources. What he objects to is two things: Making a show of one's giving or other faith practices in order to impress or control others. And ignoring the big things – like faith, compassion, and justice – while focusing on relatively trivial matters. Jesus goes on to say that this is like straining a tiny bug out of your soup... and ignoring the fact that there's a whole camel in the bowl! What an image that is!

Jesus' criticisms of these very religious folk sound harsh, but they draw on the faith tradition he and they shared. Behind his words, you can kind of hear his belief in the commandments at the heart of the faith: “Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and your neighbor as yourself.” You hear the prophet Micah: “What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God?” What he has to say is not unlike what Isaiah said about his people who showed their religious devotion (and expected to get God's approval) by fasting and other public displays of fervor... all the while tolerating exploitation of their neighbors and ignoring the hungry and homeless in their community.

Of course we wouldn't want to say that the little things don't matter. We know they do. We've all had those experiences when a small kindness, a word of encouragement, a tiny spark of humor or joy, one simple choice has made a huge difference in a day, in a week... or even in the

direction of our life. Attention to details matters in so much that we do. Being faithful in small ways *does* help us learn to be faithful in more consequential things. And it's certainly true what they say: that none of us can do everything, but all of us can do *something* to make a difference in our world.

Still. This is a place where we need to check ourselves, I think. I saw a post on Facebook the other day that went something like this: "Leave a tip. In busy traffic, let the other driver in. Hold the door. Smile. This is how we change the world, one act of kindness at a time." We often hear and read things like this. And it's hard to argue. Who's going to be against kindness?? Similarly, we are urged to do what we can to save the earth: recycle, pick up litter, take re-usable bags to the grocery store ... and most of us try to do these kinds of things. And we're glad to do them; we genuinely want to live our everyday lives in ways that add to the good in the world.

But what worries me about this is that we may be *too* drawn to the little things. That in focusing on those things, we might be forgetting to see a bigger picture and a larger calling. We might be fooling ourselves about how generous or helpful or green we are. We might be in denial about what it'll *really* take to change the world or save the planet. We might be excusing ourselves from doing the harder but more substantive work that calls out to be done. We might feel more comfortable and competent doing a few simple tasks than really wrestling with, say, our tendency to judgment rather than compassion, or the way our lifestyle is supported by injustice, or how to hold on to faith and hope in this crazy world.

I wonder what Jesus might say to us?

You donate cans of soup and packages of noodles, but you don't ask why so many of your neighbors are hungry?

You write checks to the church, but you haven't engaged your heart in the relationships and ministry of your faith community?

You busy yourself with serving others but are unwilling to admit that you need help with the burdens and hurt you are carrying?

You belong to organizations working to address community issues, but you don't hold out any real hope that anything can change?

It's easy to see the hypocrisy Jesus is calling out among the Pharisees. But notice what makes up that picture of hypocrisy: Lack of humility, plus a willingness to ignore the substance of God's call in favor of a more superficial piety.

Together those attitudes lead these ostensibly very religious folk to separate themselves from their neighbors, to believe they are entitled to respect others are not, to assume the right of power and influence over the lives of others. Their religious identity means more to them than genuine relationship with God and neighbor. So it ends up being expressed in some ways that don't mean very much, without the heart. It ends up being about *them*, about their group, their

status and power... rather than about the good of all. What they've failed to understand is that they themselves are also hurt – and their relationship with God is damaged – because they haven't made "the good of all" a goal.

Of course we read about this scene in Matthew 23 and readily agree with Jesus that the Pharisees are hypocrites. But the joke is on us because even as we judge them, we can be equally blind to our own failures to live out the heart of God's commandments. We forget to stop and wonder "what would Jesus have me do in this situation?" We can be so busy with our own concerns or even mission projects that we forget compassion. We can be blind to injustices all around us, and to the ways we contribute to them. We can be unaware of the ways we distance ourselves from our sisters and brothers, and assume an unconscious superiority – whether because of our education, resources, ability to give, role in the church, race, culture, or whatever it may be. We often fail to stop and consider "what does this situation look like from the perspective of someone who doesn't have the privileges I have?" And it's even more rare that we stop and ask "why *do* I have the privileges I have?" ... or "Do I need to set those privileges aside as I discern this situation?"

We often forget how limited our perspective is, how much we don't know. Which is why Jesus recommends humility.

"Humility" comes from the Latin word "*humilis*, meaning "low." Humility is about being down to earth, common rather than exceptional, modest not arrogant ... [or] pretentious. Jesus himself is our model for a humble life, Jesus who came "down to earth" to walk beside us.

Now, humility isn't the same thing as timidity or passivity.

In her most recent book, Carter Heyward writes that "...genuine humility... is often manifest in bold speech and action. If we understand ourselves as grounded together on this earth, sharing the same soil, none of us are entitled to greater respect as human beings, none more entitled than others to nutritious food, adequate health care, protection from harm, or other basic human rights. Believing this as the way of Jesus, our humility often will become a shout-out for justice." (p. 158)

Both Matthew 23 and Isaiah 58 are among those passages of scripture which some people see as negative and judgmental. It's not what they want to hear when they go to church. Or they avoid church because they don't want any part of "a God of wrath" or they don't want to hear about justice because it's "too political." I've heard this sort of thing from so many people, both within and outside the church.

But I would suggest that this is a problem of perspective and, maybe, a lack of humility. It's natural that someone who feels satisfied with their life would feel affronted by the idea that their self-satisfaction and comfortable faith displeases God. But to a person who's been excluded, judged, hungry ... this might sound very different. It says that God sees their pain, their need, all the ways they've been hurt or treated unfairly. And that God is angry on their behalf. From this point of view, that's good news; that's validating; that's hopeful. After all,

what good is a God who isn't angry about such things, who doesn't care? And if the people who belong to this God who is affronted by injustice and indifference can find the humility to hear and understand what really matters to God, and to their neighbors ... then there can be hope for all of us to live more authentic, neighborly, and Christ-like lives – in which we all have reason to be thankful, *together*.

Let's keep doing the little things - say thank you, take some soup to a sick friend, donate to a shelter, clean up some litter, be kind to a stranger, share the herbs from your garden (or whatever it is you have to share).

But let's not stop there. Let's also remember that there are bigger things in our world that are causing hurt to others who are God's children. Our immigrant neighbors and our transgender friends and hungry children and people struggling with addiction and homeless veterans and the under-employed who can't afford health care need more from us than kindness. They need us to be beside them, hear them, learn from them, speak up for them, advocate (and vote) for policies that address their needs, honor their dignity, welcome their gifts, and affirm their rights.

Let's make an effort to remember that "issues" are really about people; let's seek real understanding, resist judgement, and acknowledge that we are as much in need of grace as anyone. Let's not get distracted and forget the most important parts of Jesus' call to us. Let's not replace the richness and depth of God's grace with either triviality or legalism. Let's let the "little things" be the gateways to a more expansive compassion, a longing for justice as a way of life, and a deepened faith in the God whose love embraces us all. Amen.

Resources:

Carter Heyward, *The 7 Deadly Sins of White Christian Nationalism*, 2023