

Year A, Proper 31 Do what they teach, not what they do. Matthew 23 1 to 12

Robert Greenleaf, one-time research management director for AT&T, highly regards a type of worker he names as a “servant leader”. He’s written books and given talks about the servant leader. Greenleaf realized that the only person in authority deserving loyalty was the leader who demonstrated the quality of also being a servant. This was strange and innovative in the business community and important for leaders to know if they wanted their company to do well. It’s important for us to know too because, Greenleaf knew – just as we know – that the idea of the servant leader dates back many centuries to the time we read of today. The servant leader, so highly regarded not just in successful businesses but in society, appears above all in the example and teaching of Jesus. In today’s Gospel story, we have a lengthy warning from Jesus about those who claim to be leaders, yet fail to be servants.

Matthew expands on the concept of identity – and the authority that goes along with identity – of Jesus and of the Jewish religious leaders. Jesus knows the Pharisees are identified as leaders – leaders very well-acquainted with the Law. He tells the crowd that the Pharisees are “the authorized interpreters of Moses’ Law”. He encourages the crowd to listen to what the Pharisees have to say and obey them. Jesus does not have a problem with the position of Pharisee in general but he does have a big problem with certain Pharisees. Jesus takes issue with the ones who have forgotten how to be leaders in God’s kingdom. To lead in God’s kingdom is to serve.

These Pharisees, who are being blasted by Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel, have fallen woefully short of being servant leaders in two crucial areas. They are not

following God's laws and they are strutting their stuff for the wrong audience – seeking honour from people instead of praise from God.

To say they are not following God's laws is actually too simplistic to explain what was going on, what was irritating and frustrating Jesus about them. They knew the Law. They knew the Scripture inside out and backwards and they followed God's word. But there is a problem with the way they were doing this. We have 10 commandments from God. The first four commandments tell us how to have a good relationship with God and then the rest tell us how to have a good relationship with each other. Jesus boils these down for us into the two great commandments...to love God with heart, soul, and mind, and to love each other as we would love ourselves. The Pharisees elaborated on these laws to make sure that people were really clear on what they had to do to follow God's laws and they ended up with over 600 more laws to follow. Most of these, at that time, were a part of their oral tradition – what Jesus refers to as human precepts and doctrines. As members of God's covenant people, they strived to live in faithfulness to the Law, with a strong focus on avoiding ritual defilement whenever possible. Some of the Pharisees, particularly those in the political and religious centre of Jerusalem, were choosing to follow the multitude of smaller detailed tradition in such a way as to benefit their status and power in the community. This is something common today. We often encounter someone – in person or on the news – who is promoting supposedly “correct” doctrine in hateful, demeaning ways. True teaching does not abuse other people.

Jesus points out to the Pharisees that they are misusing God's word. They are so overly concerned with things like giving to the temple the right amount of cumin

and dill that they are neglecting the more important things like taking care of the poor and the widows. They are promoting their oral tradition of giving to the Temple to the detriment of God's commandment to honour their parents. Parents were being left in poverty while their children profited the high priests and Pharisees with generous offerings. Following the Law and oral tradition – especially doing so with the motivation of personal gain – became the focus of the powerful leaders, pulling them away from the intent of God's commandments which was to keep them in right relationship with God and with others, caring for and serving the people who counted on them for support and guidance.

Worse yet, the Pharisees – who taught love of God and neighbour – did not practice love of God and neighbour: they did not modify the strictness of the detailed oral tradition for the people who couldn't follow them...the poor who couldn't come to worship because they couldn't afford the temple tax...the sick who weren't allowed into the temple because they were considered unclean... This is what Jesus is talking about when he says, "They tie onto people's backs loads that are heavy and hard to carry, yet they aren't willing even to lift a finger to help them carry those loads". The Pharisees expected everyone to follow the laws and turned their backs in disdain on the people who could not.

In contrast to the load placed on the people by the Pharisees, Jesus says to us, "come to me, you who have heavy loads and I will give you rest...For the yoke I will give you is easy, and the load I will put on you is light." Jesus shows us that we are to live in faithful obedience to God and to God's word and we do this through love and compassion, mercy, and God's justice. Unlike the Pharisees, Jesus fed the hungry on the Sabbath, Jesus healed on the Sabbath, Jesus touched

an unclean leper, Jesus ate meals with the outcasts of society...and we take our cue from Jesus.

This cue, this example we find in Jesus, was very shocking and very counter-cultural. The people were not only amazed by his miracles and his teachings, they were amazed that he was throwing out the window the unspoken rules of power and status in the world. The Pharisees certainly didn't throw out these rules of power. It was accepted and expected that the people in power would wear the best clothes and take the best seats at the table. It, sadly, is not any different today. We still value the outward signs of power and status and we all enjoy prominence and praise. But, when our motivation becomes the desire for human praise rather than God's praise, we, like the Pharisees, become disconnected from God. The further one gets from loving God and doing what God wants, the easier it is to love self more than others. The Pharisees liked the reaction they got from people when they followed all of the little laws. They had Scripture passages written out and tied to their arms and foreheads and they had really long tassels on their robes – the longer your tassels, the more dedicated to God you must be. The Pharisees liked having people bow their heads to them when they passed by, they liked being invited to dinner and getting the best seat at the table, they liked feeling important. They sure were religious...but were they spiritual? There's a question that is just as common today. Are we Christians simply religious or are we spiritual? Jesus warns against seeking honorific titles – teacher, Father, instructor – confusing from a strictly literal sense “but there is more here than meets the eye. Jesus' message is that we lay aside our efforts and claims to authority and honour because the real authority and the actual honour belong to

God. And greatness in God's eyes is service" (*Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary Year A*, pp.118-19).

The Pharisees had pushed God out of their hearts and replaced it with the desire for the respect and praise and perks that came with their position. And Jesus could tell. When God has been replaced by pride and self-importance, it shows. When how we look and what we do is fuelled by the desire for personal praise and gain, it shows.

We have plenty of leaders – in the Church and in the wider world – who are not servant leaders...

Those who burden others as they go after what they want without caring how that affects the people around them.

Those who do good deeds to impress others in order to have what we refer today as an image. They do good simply to look good.

Those who expect the places of honour and marks of respect because they are puffed up with pride.

But Jesus demonstrates in his life and death what it means to be a servant who leads: His healing, his teaching, his care for the poor, the oppressed, the outcast, and his faithfulness to God's will that led him to the cross and to new life. We are called to continue his work – to be servant leaders.

So this isn't a story about Jesus telling his disciples to stay low and not feel any pride. That type of person wouldn't make a good leader either.

“The greatest one among you must be your servant. Whoever makes himself great will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be made great.”

Jesus is inviting us, along with his disciples, to think, in a counter-cultural way, about greatness and what it means to be lifted up. We want to be great and to do well. We want to be what God made us to be and to do what God wants us to do. We want to be so connected with God that what we desire and what God desires are the same thing. God encourages us to be great, to rise up.

Being great in God’s kingdom is not the same thing as being great in the earthly way – raising up in God’s kingdom is to humble yourself and serve. In all things we serve God since to love God and to love neighbour are one and the same thing – all the Law and the Prophets, Jesus reminds us. Every Christian community is a community of brothers and sisters who are one another’s servants. We gather in love to deepen our relationship with God and with each other and then go out into the world with that love to extend those relationships, widen the community. “Become what you receive,” Augustine encouraged his students preparing to receive their first taste of the bread and wine, the Body of Christ. Paul names this as leading a life worthy of God, who calls us into his own kingdom and glory.

The greatest among you will be your servant...and all who humble themselves will be exalted. “Become what you receive.”