2-18/19-17 Rev. Amy Haines

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21 Choose Humility Choosing God’s Kingdom Series

Last Sunday evening at the Grammys, the Best Country Song Award went to songwriter Lori McKenna for penning the words to Tim McGraw’s latest hit, “Humble and Kind.” Both McKenna and McGraw view the powerful words as a hope and prayer for their children in the future.

Hold the door, say "please", say "thank you"
Don't steal, don't cheat, and don't lie
I know you got mountains to climb
But always stay humble and kind
When those dreams you're dreamin' come to you
When the work you put in is realized
Let yourself feel the pride
But always stay humble and kind

Don't expect a free ride from no one
Don't hold a grudge or a chip and here's why:
Bitterness keeps you from flyin'
Always stay humble and kind

Don't take for granted the love this life gives you
When you get where you're going don't forget turn back around
And help the next one in line
Always stay humble and kind

On Friday, umc.org posted an article linking this song with *The Primitive Methodist Magazine for 1869*, whose editor wrote an article encouraging readers to draw inspiration from the life and words of Jesus, and wrote this about Jesus’ washing the disciples’ feet at the Last Supper: “This act should teach Christians to be… humble and kind to each other, not to disdain the meanest work if we can thereby benefit each other.”

 -www.umc.org/news-and-media/blogs-commentaries/post/ life-lessons-song-links-new-country-music-and-early-methodism

Today, we continue our series on Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, and are invited to choose humility. Yet what does that really mean, to be humble and kind?

CS Lewis once said, “True humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less.”

― [C.S. Lewis](http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/1069006.C_S_Lewis), [Mere Christianity](http://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/801500), goodreads.com

Humility is defined as a modest view of one’s importance. It is more about an attitude of the heart rather than any outward behavior. Humility includes showing dependence on God at the same time as showing respect to others. There is even one definition of humble as courteously respectful. --various dictionaries

..Naturalist William Beebe used to converse with Teddy Roosevelt at Sagamore Hill. Often, after an evening of talk, the two would go out on the lawn and search the skies for a certain spot of star-like light near the lower left-hand corner of the Great Square of Pegasus.

Then Roosevelt would recite: "That is the Spiral Galaxy in Andromeda. It is as large as our Milky Way. It is one of a hundred million galaxies. It consists of one hundred billion suns, each larger than our sun."  Roosevelt would then grin and say, "Now I think we are small enough! Let's go to bed." Source Unknown. On sermonillustrations.com:humility adapted

Today, we hear Jesus’ passage on humility from the Sermon on the Mount. Typically, this is the gospel text for Ash Wednesday, calling us into a period of reflection and self-denial during the season of Lent. Yet today, as we hear this passage in its broader context of Jesus’ teaching of his disciples concerning God’s kingdom ways, it is less a call to reflection and more a call to faithful living.

We ended last week’s passage with the reminder to “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Or as another translation says, “You’re kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.” (MT 5.48)

As we strive to live by God’s kingdom ways in this world rather than our own selfish desires,

Jesus challenges us today to consider the why of our living. Why do we do what we do? What is our motivation for living out our faith in our daily lives? Who are we trying to please—God, others or ourselves? Are we choosing to be humble and kind?

Be careful, Jesus declares,

**of practicing your righteousness** in front of others in order to be seen by them.

Jesus assumes that his hearers are living out their faith in God in practical ways. For the Jews, the three most common spiritual disciplines practiced were almsgiving, prayer and fasting. Jesus did not come to banish those disciplines, but to remind his followers as to the purpose behind those acts of faith.

Almsgiving is charitable giving to the poor. It is a way to show mercy, to care for the destitute, the widows and orphans, even the foreigner among the people of Israel. There are many Scripture passages that mandate this charitable giving.

Corporate prayer is an appropriate component of worship, whether spoken, sung or a time of silence. Yet it is through individual prayer where we grow in faith, those private, intimate conversations with God where we can be truly honest in confession and in praise.

Fasting has often been associated with repentance, a time to abstain in order to recognize and confess one’s sins and shortcomings. This time of abstention, or fasting, is then spent in prayer as a way to return to a right relationship with God. Abstaining from food is the most common form of fasting, as shown by Jesus in the wilderness and heard from the prophet Isaiah. Yet other forms of fasting can also be beneficial, whether from drink or sleep or physical intimacy or even now from social media.

For John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, one of his three General Rules was to Stay in Love with God, and to do so he expected the people called Methodists to practice spiritual disciplines such as public worship, family and private prayer, the ministry of the Word, searching the Scriptures, fasting and the Lord’s Supper.

So we are still called today to practice our piety, to actively choose to live by God’s ways, to learn through intentional spiritual disciplines how to live more like Christ in our daily lives.

Yet be careful, Jesus declares,

of practicing your righteousness **in front of others** in order to be seen by them.

While the disciplines of almsgiving, prayer and fasting were often considered to be private disciplines, the Pharisees made it a point to practice these disciplines in ways that others knew what they were doing. They would give to the poor when others were watching. They would pray aloud in the midst of a crowd. They would disfigure their face when fasting, purposefully remaining unclean and disheveled, so that others would know what they were doing.

There are times when we live out our faith in public ways.

Then there are times when we live out our faith in very private ways.

We are called to gather together publicly for worship. The Lord’s Supper is only to be shared in community or on behalf of the church community to shut ins. Yet our searching of the Scriptures will occur not only in worship and Bible studies, but also in the privacy of our homes and cars. We cannot know God’s word fully if we only rely on what we hear read and proclaimed on a Sunday morning.

While we will grow together, serve together, worship together, and pray together within the church, we must continue to practice our faith outside of these walls, in the privacy of our homes, in the breakroom and the boardroom, even in the confines of our cars.

Jesus does not call us to be Sunday only Christians, to live by faith only in front of other Christians. What we say in public on a Sunday morning ought to be congruent with what we say in private on a Friday evening. How we act toward one another today ought to be similar to how we act toward the grocery clerk or school administrator or that nosy neighbor, and in so doing reflect the grace of God.

So be careful, Jesus declares,

of practicing your righteousness in front of others **in order to be seen by them.**

When our faith is evident in our actions, who are we trying to please? God? Ourselves? Our coworkers or neighbors? The men and women in the pew behind us or in our committee or study group?

What motivates us to live by faith? Are we striving to be faithful to God’s ways in our world?

Are we trying to feel good about our giving and our living? Are we striving to keep up an appearance that we are a good Christian who has it all together? Are we trying to enhance our reputation in the eyes of others?

Why do we do what we do in the name of Jesus?

Jesus exaggerated the ways that the supposedly faithful, religious leaders, the Pharisees, practiced their faith, ways that demanded the attention and affirmation of others as their motivation: Sounding a trumpet whenever they gave an offering; Praying loudly on street corners; Refusing to wash their face or brush their hair whenever they were fasting.

Yet what is not exaggerated is the pressure these religious leaders put upon themselves in their honor-shame culture in order to gain the favor of others. In their society, a person’s good reputation was dependent on the court of public opinion. You gave as a display of wealth, power or position. You prayed in ways that were favorable for one’s peers. You showed you fasted as a symbol of being a faithful Jew. Honorable, public acts were expected in order to gain favor. And once one had gained favor, there was a dependence created that beneficiaries of such behavior were expected to reciprocate. So the motivations to give were purely extrinsic rather than intrinsic or to gain heavenly favor.

Professor Matt Skinner once said,

..Charity is not charity when an intent to garner attention and influence lies behind it. Prayer is not prayer when the one praying is more interested in calling attention to one's own efforts, eloquence, or importance than in conducting honest communication with God. Fasting, which enacts humanity's utter dependence upon God …instead mocks that dependence when the fast is poisoned by attempts to impress others with the depths of the faster's devotion.

-Matt Skinner 2-25-09 workingpreacher.org

In what ways do we struggle with living our faith guided by the wrong motivations, wanting to please others rather than please God?

Consider our charitable giving- do we give because God calls us to give and we sincerely want to help make a difference in someone’s life, or do we give because we get a tax write off, or because we will be recognized on a donor list? I actually know of a church that had to turn down a sizable donation because the donor insisted on too many stipulations, seeking man’s glory rather than God’s glory.

Consider our prayers- do we insist that formal prayers are more devout, and are thus offended when heartfelt, sincere prayers are offered that grammatically are a jumbled mess? Sadly many devout Christians won’t risk praying in public because they are fearful of saying something wrong, fearful of being made fun of, fearful of being labeled a religious fanatic.

Consider fasting- do we abstain for certain things in our lives at certain times because we are motivated by deepening our relationship with God, or because we are motivated to keep up with our neighbor? How many abstain from certain foods simply to lose weight and look good?

How many abstain from political comments on Facebook simply to not lose friends? There are many ways that we abstain or fast in modern life; however most of the reasons we do so nowadays has nothing to do with our faith. What would it look like to recapture the discipline of fasting as spiritual renewal?

Jesus condemned the religious leaders as hypocrites, as those who claimed one thing yet lived another. Like the original hypocrites who were stage actors, Jesus maintained that the religious leaders were pretending to be someone they were not, like an actor who is different behind the mask than the character in which they portray.

Consider how many in our day and age have had a very public religious persona that then crumbled when upon closer examination there was a significant disconnect between the public persona and the private person at home. While none of us are perfect, pride goeth before a fall.

Even within our own West Ohio Conference there have been too many pastors who were seen as the rising stars who later crashed and burned because they got caught up in the public accolades and neglected their personal relationship with Jesus.

Listen to today’s passage with the echo of Micah 6:8 ringing in your ear:

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

We are not to give solely for our own pleasure. We are not to live in ways that show off how religious we are. We are not to serve only to gain the praise of our peers.

Rather, as was stated in Matthew 5:16, we are called to live for Jesus in ways that others see God through us. When we approach life from a heart of humility, then what we do is not about us, but about God working through us. From a heart of humility, our behavior will match our inner convictions.

And then we will realize that our true treasure is not what is stored in barns and buildings;

our reward will not be financial gain nor a smooth life; instead, our reward, our greatest treasure, is a deepening relationship with God.

God sees all that we do—the good and the not so good, the faithful and the selfish ways we live—and God reminds us that we do not need to be seen by others in order to have value, in order to be good, in order to be loved by God. God already loves us, before we say or do anything. And whether or not the living out of our faith is in public or in secret, God sees. And God will reward a faithful, humble heart.

..It was John Riskin who said,

"I believe the first test of a truly great man is his humility. I do not mean by humility, doubt of his own power, or hesitation in speaking his opinion. But really great men have a ... feeling that the greatness is not in them but through them; that they could not do or be anything else than God made them."  *-Today in the Word*, August 5, 1993. Sermonillustrations.com:humility

So who are we trying to please when we practice our faith? What is our motivation for living out our faith in our daily lives? Why do we do what we do?

Is it all for our own pleasure, for the affirmation from others, or to honor our God?

My prayer is that what we do is evidence of what we believe which flows from treasuring our relationships with God. And as faithful disciples of Jesus, we will strive to live by God’s kingdom ways in this world, thinking of ourselves less and God more. May we be humble and kind.

May it be so. Let us pray.