



North Shore
**Congregational
Church**
FOX POINT, WI

From the Pulpit...

“The Dualism Dilemma”

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

Matthew 23: 1-12; Romans 6: 1-14

January 20, 2019

I was reminded, in overhearing an interaction between a few individuals who were here for a memorial service a few weeks ago, of a story that goes back over ten years now. I was sitting in my office at the First Congregational Church of Clarkston, MI, as members of the Town Hall Quilt Guild were making their way through the building and down to the fellowship hall where they were hosting a workshop for the day. Now, for those of you who have not been around these groups, you might be quite surprised at how rowdy a group of quilters can be. So, normally, my office door was shut when that group was around. But, they were just arriving, and it hadn't yet been closed.

Anyway, I was sitting in my office working at my desk, when two quilters came through the front door and started chatting in the hall just outside my office. I don't know what prompted this statement – I don't know what the first woman said in particular – but I heard the one of the women in the conversation exclaim, in response to some sort of comment from the other, “You can't say that here! We're in a church!”

I can't tell you how many times I've heard that from all sorts of people, in all sorts of situations, in all sorts of churches. It's the exact same words I heard exclaimed right in our hallway outside the library 2 weeks ago. It's a comment I've heard countless times, and it is a perspective that has fascinated me for years. There is this common notion, out there, that our behavior, our speech, and our all-around conduct somehow needs to be different once we walk through those doors enter the church building. There's this concept that it is somehow irreverent or sacrilegious to continue certain behaviors, or use certain language, or act in certain ways, inside the church building.

Think about it...

- Consider the language you use on the golf course, or at work, or when you're angry at your spouse, or when you're simply seated around a table or a campfire with your friends. Then consider how often you'd use some of that same language when you are here, at church.
- Consider the way you treat that person who cuts you off in traffic, that individual with a overflowing cart-full of groceries going through the express lane at the grocery store, or

that coach or referee that made a decision that didn't favor your child or grandchild on the field. Then consider whether or not you'd treat someone the same way here, in the church.

- Consider the things you do, the words you say, the actions you take and the decisions you make in your homes, in your workplaces, on the road, in the store, or anywhere else, and then consider how often those actions, words and decisions are things you would never replicate here, in the church.

I hear it all the time. I see it all the time. I was actually familiar with one church that held a weekly Bible study at a local pub. It was a very interesting program in which people gathered in the back room of this small local pub and had a very comfortable and enjoyable atmosphere as they discussed their weekly readings. Meeting people where they are – more power to you. Those are great ministries. I found it humorous and ironic, however, to know that this same church, with this weekly Bible study taking place in a bar, had a rule written into their bylaws prohibiting the presence of alcohol of any kind in the church building for any purpose – including communion. The church so opposed to alcohol in their building that they write it into their bylaws, sponsoring a Bible study in a local pub. Think about that!

You see, we have this notion that our behavior, our speech, and our all-around conduct needs to be different once we walk through those doors enter the church building. We've developed this 'sacred' understanding of the building in which worship occurs, and the morning on which we all come together, that has driven us to this place in which we expect that we must talk, act, behave and be completely different once we set foot on the hallowed ground that is the church building. But, here's the problem – we spend so much energy making sure that we act differently when we're in the '**church**' that we completely and totally lose track of the fact that the point of 'the Church' is that it should change how we act in the **world**.

That's really the essence of what Paul is getting to in the passage from the letter to the Romans that I read earlier. "11 So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. 12 Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. 13 No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. 14 For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace."

As is often typical for Paul, the argument he lays out is a little heady and somewhat wordy, but his conclusion is pretty simple. Jesus died for us. Jesus died for us by taking on our sins and transgressions. And, now, Jesus has conquered death and is alive in God. And, because Jesus died for our sins and transgressions, because Jesus is alive in God, we too are dead to sin and alive in God. Paul is simply exclaiming that as children of the grace and mercy of God shown to us in Jesus, we are compelled to leave behind our lives of transgression and embrace a life in God.

Now, the point of all this is that Paul's argument is not, 'Jesus died for us, therefore we need to live decent lives most of the time but really ramp it up when we come to church on Sunday morning.' Paul's argument is not, 'Jesus died for us, therefore we need to be relatively good

people all the time but have to make sure we put on our ‘Sunday best’ every time we walk through the doors of the church building.’ No! Paul’s argument is, ‘Jesus died for us, Jesus overcame sin and death in our lives, therefore, as children of the grace and mercy of God shown to us in Jesus, we are compelled to embrace a life in God.’ Paul’s argument is that what we celebrate in worship on Sunday should change the way we live every day – not that we should set our everyday behavior aside for the purpose of coming to worship on Sunday.

It comes down to that issue of integrity in faithfulness. It’s that issue of whether there is consistency between the public me, and the private me – the Sunday me, and the weekday me. It’s a question of whether I actually am the person I want everyone at church to think I am.

That’s the message Jesus is proclaiming in regard to teachers of the Law and the Pharisees in our passage from Matthew this morning. He says it so plainly. “Therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach.” In other words – do as they say, not as they do. Why? Because, they have no integrity in their faithfulness. Because, there is no consistency between what they practice and what they preach. Because, what they do in front of you, and what they do the rest of the time, are two completely different things.

Jesus speaks, in that passage, of things most of us aren’t familiar with. He talks about their phylacteries and their fringes. Fringes are like tassels (most of us can picture what a tassel is – much along the lines of what hangs from the brim of a graduate’s cap). Fringes were attached as adornments on the prayer gowns that were worn by the Jewish men at times of prayer. The phylacteries on the other hand (which you can see on the front of your order of worship), were little boxes that held scripture verses. Men were to wear one of these boxes on their forehead and the other on their arm when they were at prayer – as a reminder to keep the Law.

So, what Jesus is doing when he talks about these men who wear their fringes long and their phylacteries wide, is describing how they are making sure they do it so well when they’re in public, only to return to a completely different life when they leave the synagogue or temple. In other words, Jesus is looking at those people who are entering the place of worship and putting on their ‘Sunday best’ (only to leave that place and return to living their ‘weekday norm’) and he says of those people, very openly – do as they say, not as they do! Why? Because, there’s no integrity in what they do. Because, the point of our faith is not to come in and be at our best as we celebrate on Sunday. Because, the point of our faith is that what we celebrate on Sunday should empower us to try to live at our best when we leave this place and return to the ‘real world.’

I think it is often far more subconscious that we realize. But, we’ve somehow landed at this place of treating so much of our world in that profoundly dualistic manner.

- There’s the heavenly, and there’s the worldly.
- There’s the divine, and there’s the human.
- There’s the Church, and there’s the world.
- There’s Sunday, and there’s the rest of the week.

We've almost inherently adopted this division between sacred and secular and it has driven us to the point of not giving a second thought to the fact that we feel we need to act differently the moment we set foot on the church campus. Whether we realize or not, we subconsciously envision this chasm between that which is Godly and that which is worldly, and it is so natural in our lives that we don't even blink at the concept of believing that that our behavior, our speech, and our all-around conduct needs to be different once we walk through those doors and enter the church building. All the while, we miss the fundamental point.

The moment we feel we need to act differently when we walk through these doors, is the moment we have forgotten that Jesus calls to integrity in faith. The moment we proclaim that our actions aren't appropriate because we're in the church, is the moment we acknowledge that our actions aren't appropriate outside the church. The moment we need to act differently in order to become who we should be in here is the moment we admit we're not measuring up to the person we should be out there. Now, please don't get me wrong. I am not implying that we should all be living some life of ascetic abstinence that denounces all the joys of life – we are meant to enjoy the blessings of life. What I'm saying, is that what's ok 'out there' should be ok 'in here,' and what's not ok 'in here,' shouldn't be ok, 'out there.' What I'm saying is that the next time you find yourself correcting your behavior because you're in the church, perhaps the question you should be asking is whether or not that behavior should be happening at all.