

Pointing to Someone Else

Matthew 6:1-4

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So I think it's probably best to just start off reading the text for this morning, and we can go from there. Matthew chapter 6, "Be careful not to do your acts of righteousness before men, to be seen by them. If you do you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. So when you give to the needy do not announce it with trumpets as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the street to be honored by men. I tell you the truth; they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you."

So we're talking here about a fairly common practice in synagogue life involving giving some money, which went to the poor - the needy in the area. There were a lot of them at this time. Within the English text or the translation, there's something a little bit difficult to understand; the whole business about the trumpet. I've come across a few different interpretations of what that might mean. One of them could refer to a trumpet that was blown to announce that it was a time for prayer, a time to gather at the synagogue. As good as that sounds, there's a grammatical issue with that, and basically it amounts to the sounder of the trumpet is also the person that gives. So I don't know about you, but I don't blow a trumpet and play a little John Phillip Sousa before I do the laundry. I'm guessing you don't either, and I seriously doubt that they did. Well as it turns out there were trumpet shaped bowls that would be used to collect the alms. The reason why they were trumpet shaped is that it was very easy to put money in, and not so easy to take money out; if you get my drift.

Now I don't have a trumpet shaped bowl, I don't think Pastor Hal would appreciate it if I used his trumpet, but I do have a mixing bowl. Work with me, it's close enough. Say I'm Joe Judean and I'm going to the synagogue and I want to give a little bit of money to the poor. (Coin in bowl makes a clanking sound.) Okay fair enough, not that big of a deal, not that loud. *BUT*, if I want some attention, if I want to say, "look how generous I am..." (Two or three coins in bowl makes louder sound.) Exactly, I got your attention; if anyone was asleep they aren't anymore. (Several coins in bowl makes even louder sound) Look at how generous I am - kind of what that says.

Now we obviously don't have a trumpet shaped metal bowls to collect our offerings, but there are other ways it could be done. Time for the offering to come around "Well let me get my check out - hmmm -" lean over to the person next to me, "Did I spell Redeemer right? Let's see, one thousand...how do you spell thousand?" You can still find ways of attracting the attention for when you're doing something good, when you're giving money.

The reality though is this passage has very little to do with money. Say I get roped into cleaning off the tables in the Fellowship Hall. Well, the Fellowship Hall echoes, which means that if someone's walking through it, and I'm stuck here washing tables, I'm going to hear them coming, which means sit up a little straighter, put my neck out as I'm washing so they can see me. 'Oh look at Eric, he's such a servant, he's washing the tables. It's very easy to be

recognized, to work a situation into the favor of, 'Hey I'm doing something good, someone give me some attention and pat me on the back.'

Now there's nothing necessarily bad about receiving the approval of people, the approval of your peers or your mentors, your supervisors and so on. I do in some sense have to get the approval of people on the board of directors because my job depends on it. But when that becomes a motivation for doing something, but when that becomes sort of the reward, or the goal that you're looking for; there might be an issue, that might be a problem. Because if a reward is my motivation and I'm doing something, even if I'm giving generously, serving with so much time and what little money I have, giving and giving; my whole goal is *ME*. My whole goal is to get some approval, maybe get some recognition, a certificate or a gift certificate - that's not so good.

See what happens when we do something good, do something very positive, but our underlying goal or motivation is to receive some sort of approval or some sort of a reward, what happens? The answer to that is 'not much.' The real power in giving and serving and sacrificing a little bit of yourself isn't only in the act, it is also in the change in your heart that takes place; because then you start looking a little bit more like Jesus, which I would think would be a good thing.

Now I found a second text, not actually from the bible; I couldn't even find a source. If you've heard of this before please tell me because I'd like to give credit where credit is due. It's called *How To Be Miserable*. And it says, "Think about yourself, talk about yourself; use I as often as possible. Mirror yourself continually in the opinion of others. Listen greedily to what people say about you, expect to be appreciated. Be suspicious, be jealous and envious. Be sensitive to critique. Never forgive a criticism, trust nobody but yourself, insist on consideration and respect. Demand agreement with your own views on everything. Sulk if people are not grateful to you for favors shown them. Never forget a service you have rendered. And if the title is any indication following that results in misery."

The funny thing though is it sounds an awful lot like human nature. I don't know about you, but my guess is, "yes I see myself in that." Unfortunately that's just part of being who we are, at least for starters. The reality is that we're stuck in an entire world that wants to make it all about us. Our biggest sins, our biggest mistakes in our lives are generally going to be the times when we thought that the world revolved around us. Or if you're married, when we thought that our marriage revolved around us. I'm guilty of this too; I'm not just pointing fingers. I think at this point there's something that's profoundly powerful in the Christian message and Christian spirituality; especially in the teachings of Christ. And as we're going through the Sermon on the Mount, this is sort of the apex. Christian spirituality, Christian thinking is all about getting us outside of ourselves. It's re-orienting us, it's saying I'm not the center; my thoughts are not going to be consumed by me. It's about serving, forgiving, generosity; and the reason those things are so powerful is because they get us outside of ourselves which is our problem in the first place.

Now think about the people that have touched your life or shaped it in profound ways. There's probably only a handful; teachers, coaches, parents, mentors, pastors, whomever. My guess is they didn't pour themselves into your life expecting some kind of reward, some of them maybe, because after all we're not perfect. My guess is by and large they gave themselves selflessly, and when that happened, and when that does happen, profound transformation takes place. I think of how my mentor, my now sainted mentor actually, poured into me. He didn't get paid for it, he

took time out of his day, he didn't really expect any kind of thanks, but it made such an impact. My question this morning is why? Why is it when someone gives themselves in sacrifice, someone is generous or someone is charitable or loving and caring, and they give themselves without any hope or expectations of reward, why is that so significant?

So with that in the back of our minds I want to turn to kind of the trump card of all sermon illustrations. I don't know if you've heard the joke, but in Sunday School the answer is always Jesus. When the Sunday School teacher asks you a question the answer is usually going to be Jesus, and it might occasionally be 'He died for our sins.' The trump card for sermon illustrations is Mother Theresa, because her example and her life speak so much to the Christian message. Actually I watched a guy talk about his experience of going to Calcutta and serve with Mother Theresa and her group. He noticed something at morning mass that Mother Theresa's feet were just mangled; they were in bad shape. But as he said, it's Mother Theresa so it's not like you can just go up and say, "Hey Mother Theresa, you going to get that checked out, call a podiatrist? Probably not." But he did find himself talking to one of the sisters, and he asked about it. She said whenever we get a shipment of donated second hand shoes, we arrange them, organize them, figure out which ones we can use. And then when it comes time to give them out to the people that need them, obviously if Mother Theresa needed shoes she would be able to get some shoes. But she couldn't stand the idea of having better shoes than the people she served and so she always picked the ones that were in the worst shape. There's not really opportunity for reward in that situation, but she did it anyway because there was a profound sincerity about what she does.

So then continuing with the question I asked a minute ago, why? Why is it so beautiful, fundamentally powerful, when someone gives or sacrifices for someone else without any pretensions? No hope of reward, not a chance. Why is that so profound? I don't think that anyone would flat out and say; no it's not good when someone sacrifices for someone else. Or when gives generously or anonymously without any hope of reward, it would be kind of ludicrous to say that was bad. So why? It's like one of those few things that it's the case across the board. I submit this morning that a possible answer to that is that self-sacrifice, generosity, giving, charity that these are traits that are woven into the fabric of creation. We can say that God is someone that gives generously, that loves other people, that puts them first; and obviously He's not going to be looking for a reward, because how do you reward God?

We talked in a theology classes as an undergraduate and graduate student the whole time about the idea of the Trinity. And it goes on and on and on to the point where it just becomes so mind-boggling and mind numbingly boring that it doesn't mean anything anymore. But at its core, the Trinity is an extreme example of God's nature, giving to other people. You see you have Father, Son and Holy Spirit; three persons but one God. Not terribly easy to understand; I don't really get it but that's just how God has revealed Himself. But yet you have the Father who wants to glorify and honor the Son. You have the Son that wants to give the Father glory. You have Jesus, the Son, wanting to send the Holy Spirit. You have the Holy Spirit wanting to bring others to Jesus, who still just wants to bring back to the Father, who wants to glorify Jesus. You can see there's something inherent about the person of God Himself that is generous and giving; and you see that throughout history. Ultimately when you look at *the* example, the point at which history turns, which is God coming into the earth and giving Himself.

We talk about the death of Jesus and the resurrection constantly because we're Lutherans and that's what we do; and that's a good thing. But if I may reframe that just a little bit, that when Jesus talks about don't be like the hypocrites and give just because you want a pat on the back or some other kind of reward. Be generous because you're generous. That somehow, in some way, it's mirroring who God is. And who is God? God is one that would die for you and you can't reward Him because He's God! There's something very powerful about that.

We talk about the kingdom of God or the church, God's people, the invisible church; a million different names for the same thing. We're a people that gather here on Sunday mornings and every Sunday we take communion; not every church does, but we do. And as the weeks go by we establish a rhythm; come to church to hear a message, you sing songs, you receive God. And part of that rhythm is God giving generously and without hope for reward, because that's who He is every week, and He's woven it into who we are as God's people as the redeemed, as the rescued, as the forgiven. We are these things because that's who we are, that's who God made us to be.

So my point this morning isn't to just say be very quiet when you give money. Or wear a mask when you're doing something good for other people so no one will know it's you. I think if you're out in Fellowship Hall cleaning tables with a mask I'd probably call the police. But I'm not saying do this, do that because I said so or because Jesus said so, but because this is just who we are. If we take place in the rhythm of the church, the rhythm of God giving Himself to us freely, completely, and without any hope of reward, then that's who we are also because Jesus is a part of us. And that's why we're here, because that's who God is; it all goes back to that. Amen.