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Matt. 23:1-12
November 3, 2002

“Making Your Mother Proud”

Have you seen the Peanuts cartoon where Lucy is playing her role as psychiatrist?

She sits in her booth with a sign that reads: "Psychiatric Help - 5 cents." The sign below it says, "The Doctor Is In."

And we see Lucy saying to Charlie Brown, "Your life is like a house."

In the next frame, she says reflectively, "You want your house to have a solid foundation, don't you?"

Charlie Brown has a kind of blank look on his face.

Lucy says, "Of course you do."

Charlie Brown is still silent - saying nothing.

Then in the next frame, psychiatrist Lucy says, "So don't build your house on the sand, Charlie Brown."

About that time, a huge wind comes up and blows the booth down. Lucy, sitting in the rubble says, "Or use cheap nails."

In our Scripture text this morning, Jesus reminds the Scribes and the Pharisees, that they must practice what they preach.

It is not enough to have the right doctrine. It is not enough to know all the laws. It is not enough to correctly teach people the rules.

Leaders must live by the advice they give. If you tell people to build a home on a solid foundation, but then use cheap nails in the construction of your own home, then you are a hypocrite.

Hypocrisy is a common problem in all religions, in all churches, and in all of our lives.

It's never easy to completely live up to one's beliefs. And some people, outside the faith, take great pleasure in finding fault in our failure to do what we profess to be.

We believe in the 10 commandments. We accept them as a guide for our behavior, but don't always obey them.

It's hard to get a passing grade on even the first commandment. "You shall have no other gods before me."

Just think of all the things we sometimes make more important than God - houses, wealth, jobs, church, sleep, TV, the internet ... the list is endless.

We claim to follow Jesus, but sometimes we don't. Sometimes following Jesus is just too hard and sometimes we are just too easily swayed.

We teach love, but there are times when love is not evident in our behavior - to our friends, our kids, our spouse, our Lord.

And, we've all been there, haven't we?

We tell people not to judge others, but we end up judging. Jesus said to take the log out of your eye before you try taking the speck out of your neighbor's eye.

Who has not used this quote from Jesus to get people off our backs when we feel judged, to expose hypocrisy?

And Jesus said enough. Enough hypocrisy. It's time to not only talk the talk, but walk the walk.

In Texas they say that someone who isn't walking the walk is "All hat and no cattle."

But that was just the first in a series of things Jesus points out that the scribes and Pharisees were doing ... or not doing, as the case may be.

In our text, Jesus gives us a litany of criticisms leveled against the Scribes and Pharisees:

- They did not practice what they taught (hypocrisy).
- They put heavy burdens on others but not themselves (legalism).
- They sought and loved public recognition (pride).
- Status, respect and titles were important to them (arrogance).
- They locked people out of the kingdom (judgmental).
- They established laws to benefit themselves (greed).
- They neglected to emphasize justice and mercy (bias).
- They were accomplices to silencing the prophets (oppressive).

Kind of sounds like some of our politicians in Washington
D.C.!

Keep in mind that leadership here in Jesus' day was not limited to what we would call clergy.

The scribes and Pharisees were not the priests in the temple, but lay leaders who lived very disciplined lives.

Still, they were the ones with religious authority. People looked to them for spiritual guidance and as models. And Jesus warns the people to be careful.

When Jesus spoke of the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus used them as an example of how not to behave. Their arrogance and judgmental attitude alienated people from God's kingdom.

After pointing out the behavior of the religious leaders, Jesus looked his followers in the eye and said:

"But you -- you don't have to be that way. You are all precious and there is no need for anyone to be superior over others."

Jesus alone is our teacher, our master, our judge. And he calls us to lives of humble service.

Jesus says, "You don't have to be that way." Indeed, we need not identify ourselves by our superiority over others.

Instead, we receive our identity from God. First and foremost, we are children of God.

And as children of God, we are free to be the person God has created us to be, without having to be the best at everything we do.

As a child of God we don't need to judge others in order to make ourselves look good. We are already precious to God. God loves you, God loves me.

And as I've said many, many times before, there is nothing you can do to make God love you more. And, believe it or not, there is nothing you can do to make God love you less!

It's just so, so hard to believe!

It is easy to fall into the trap of outer significance. No sooner do we acquire a little power than we are trying to display it with letters after our name, or through the clothes on our back, or by titles on our door.

Someone once wrote Ann Landers a letter asking if a person who receives an honorary doctoral degree should use it publicly.

She said, "Yes. He should make it known and put the title before his name. Everyone should be expected to call him Doctor. All the rights and privileges therein should be enjoined.

"He should frame the degree and put it on the wall. And then, at the end of the day, put it in a drawer and never take it out again."

Then she quoted someone, I don't remember who... who said:

It is ok to be called teacher, if you are a teacher in deed.

It is ok to be called father, if you are a father in deed.
It is ok to be called doctor, if you are a doctor in deed.
It is ok to be called mother, if you are a mother in deed.
For it is not the title, but the deed that makes it so.”

The American Poet Edgar A. Guest put it this way:

I'd rather see a sermon than hear one, any day;
I'd rather one should walk with me, than merely show the
way;
The eye's a better pupil and more willing than the ear.
Fine counsel is confusing, but examples always clear,
And the best of all the preachers, are the ones who live
their creeds,
For to see good put in action is what everybody needs.

That puts a pretty heavy responsibility on the preacher, doesn't it? But, we are all ministers in the family of God, right? And doesn't it also make sense? We are what we do, more honestly, than what we say.

Someone who understood that completely was a woman who died recently, Ninety-one year old Osceola McCarty.

She probably won't be remembered by very many people of power, position or substance but she WILL be remembered by the

ongoing impact she continues to make on the lives of students at the University of Southern Mississippi.

Had it not been for her selfless gift, probably none of us would have ever heard about Osceola McCarty.

You see, Osceola McCarty was a washer woman. She washed other peoples' clothes all of her life.

And every week, she put a little aside in a savings account. Her banker told her that was a wise thing to do. So, she did.

After awhile, she had quite a bit of money and her banker suggested she invest it. So, she did.

In the summer of 1995 she did something unheard of, she donated \$150,000, most of her life savings, to the University of Southern Mississippi to help students get an education and have a better life than she did.

Her unselfish gift inspired others to give as well. And soon some six hundred people added over \$330,000 to the original scholarship fund.

Today, the market value of the Oseola McCarty Endowed Scholarship Fund totals nearly \$745,000.

Forty-four students have received McCarty Scholarships with more than \$370,000 awarded since the scholarship's inception.

And, it is said that it was her gift that is what inspired and prompted Ted Turner to give his Billion Dollar gift to the United

Nations – where he pledged \$100 million a year, for ten years. And then made good on his pledge!

Osceola McCarty was a servant all of her life. She worked for everyone else. Yet she became a leader and an inspiration through being a good steward of what God had given her.

And, she knew the love of God. She found that God took care of her quite well. Her servant attitude helped her to leave, not just a gift, but a legacy that will touch lives for a long time.

What do you want your legacy to be? One that is tied up in “cheap nails” or one that would make your mother proud?

The truth is, we will never be perfect. We will never even always be able to do the best we can.

Well - Good! Now that we know that, we can relax and just do what we can.

If we can remember that it is in humble service that we are blessed. If we can remember that it is in loving response that we are called to serve.

Jesus said it’s all about service. He shared that in the sacrament we will participate in in a few minutes. Humble service. Practicing what we preach.

And what a blessing that is.

Let us pray.