

# Where Do We Stand?

November 5, 2017

Matthew 23: 1-12

22nd Sunday after Pentecost

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Jesus has not been winning any friends among his people's religious leaders ... since he rode into Jerusalem on that donkey a few chapters back in Matthew's Gospel ... after he went about cleaning up the Temple of its money changers ... after he challenged those same leaders with their mixed loyalty to God and to Caesar ... and after he told parables that indicted them.

It has been a busy week ... as the author of this gospel tells Jesus' story.

So by the time we get to today's text ... Jesus has had enough of all this sparring with these leaders ... and instead of any further discussion with them ... he turns instead to his disciples and the crowd that has gathered around him ... and he begins to denounces their leadership in pretty harsh terms.

Jesus says they are so full of themselves and their titles ... that they are missing the main point of what a religious leader should do.

He tells those gathered around him that these leaders are correct in their teachings about the law ... there is no doubt that they know the law ... but Jesus tells the people that these leaders fail to follow their own teachings.

These leaders tie up heavy burdens to place on the people's shoulders ... and do nothing to help them deal with them.

And when these leaders actually do the right thing ... it's for all the wrong reasons ... in other words when they do something right ... it's only done to impress others.

Today we might say ... Jesus condemns these leaders for not walking the talk ... for not practicing what they preach ... and he continues this condemnation of what he calls these "blind guides" throughout the entire 23rd chapter of Matthew ... leaving his listeners with little doubt about where he stands.

For Jesus ... there are things that are right ... and very clearly ... there are things that are wrong. For Jesus ... the law existed so it could help us to love one another ... but it could also be wrongly interpreted ... and so become a burden to people.

You will remember that our church was asked to participate ... last Sunday evening ... in a service to mark the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation ... that day when the Catholic Priest and theologian Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of a church ... in hopes of igniting changes in the Catholic Church ... changes in those teachings and practices he had come to reject.

What happened of course is that a different religion was formed ... as other would-be reformers like John Calvin joined him in his protest ... and the Protestant church was born.

The service on Sunday ... oddly enough ... took place in our local Catholic Church and when I joked with our convener ... Pastor Daryl from Calvary Lutheran Church about that ... he said the service was designed as a service of unity ... as well as to honor the reformation.

And so there we all were ... the Catholics and the Lutherans ... the Episcopalians and the Congregationalists ... the United Methodist and the Assembly of God ... all there praying for unity ... in the Body of Christ.

But of course ... as we all know ... that unity is hard to come by ... even in Angola.

We couldn't have communion during the service because most of the congregation wouldn't have been welcome at the table in the Catholic Church ... and some folks probably wouldn't have received communion there anyway.

And I kept thinking that if it were Sunday morning ... I ... as an ordained woman ... certainly wouldn't have been allowed in the Catholic Church's pulpit ... or some of the other churches present Sunday night.

And among many of the churches present ... our LGBTQ friends would not have been welcomed either.

And so I sat there Sunday evening wondering ... do I really want unity ... and the answer is that I don't ... not as long as the Lord's table is not open to all ... not as long as women aren't allowed in pulpits ... not as long as LGBTQ folks aren't welcomed as full participants in the body.

Unfortunately ... or perhaps fortunately ... churches define what it means to be a Christian in very different ways. Do we use their definition of unity or ours? Can both sides be right? Do we just live and let live?

Or is one way fundamentally right and the other fundamentally wrong? Do we stand up ... and speak up ... and say that? And if so ... do we have the courage to name such injustice in such a cozy place ... as our bulletin cover asks us this morning.

For many Christians ... and myself included ... unity in the Body of Christ can only be achieved when everyone is treated justly ... when love undergirds everything we do ... when we all take Jesus' central command deeply into our souls and try our darndest to follow it ... love God with everything in us and let that lead us to love neighbor as our very selves.

Our friend Philip Gulley ... that Quaker preacher and author from Indianapolis ... takes this idea further when he wrote recently that Christianity requires the growth of conscience ... in other words ... it should make us better and better people.

He said Christianity opens our eyes ... in other words ... it should help us to see with the eyes of God.

He said Christianity ... should include the truth plainly spoken ... should ask us to defend the underdog ... should ask us to stand with the oppressed ... and should encourage us to speak up when others are denigrated and diminished.

So ... can there be unity ... should there be unity in the Body of Christ ... with those who demean women ... castigate homosexuals ... believe people of color inferior ... and harbor great fear of immigrants.

There was nothing inherently wrong with Sunday night's service ... Pastor Daryl was trying to do a very good thing for our community ... and yet I do believe we have to continue to be very clear as individual Christians and as church ... that unity is not the goal ... unless it is a unity based on a radical welcome for all God's people.

We have to take Jesus' warning this morning ... about the church laying heavy burdens on the people's shoulders ... very seriously.

Because friends ... we live in a time when there is a very blurred line between what is right and what is wrong ... and many churches ... in collusion with our government leaders ... are laying heavy burdens on many ... burdens which at times suggest that nothing is ever objectively right or wrong ... that if some people embrace an idea ... that idea is valid and must be respected.

For example ... there is an immediate outcry from political leaders and vocally supported by some churches ... to change our immigration laws when a Muslim kills eight people on a bike trail in New York City ... but when a white American kills dozens and wounds 500 more ... those same leaders make it very clear that changing gun laws won't do any good.

And so a heavy burden is laid on the shoulders of our Muslim American brothers and sisters.

For example ... when outspoken and violent white supremacists proactively planned a rally that was pro-racism in Charlottesville ... and people showed up to resist that kind of racial oppression ... we were told there were two sides to what happened there ... we were given a false equivalency ... the line between right and wrong was blurred.

And so a heavy burden is laid on the shoulders of our brothers and sisters of color.

Many of our government leaders ... including Indiana's former governor and now Vice-President, Mike Pence ... supported by many of our churches ... want to pass laws allowing our LGBTQ neighbors to be legally discriminated against. Our President even joked ... at least we hope he was joking ... that Vice-President Pence wants to hang LGBTQ persons.

And so a heavy burden is laid on the shoulders of LGBTQ persons.

For example ... women continue to be objectified in this culture as sexual objects first ... and human beings second. Women are groped, assaulted and raped by some of the most powerful men in our culture ... most of the time with impunity ... and many church leaders continue to support those

powerful men over their victims. Women are killed by their domestic partners every day in this nation ... and too often the church continues to ask them what they did wrong.

And so a heavy burden is laid on the shoulders of women.

It seems we have become deeply confused in this nation ... and perhaps that's because there is deep confusion in so many of our churches ... about what is right and what is wrong ... about what Jesus said and what he didn't say ... and so still today ... we are laying heavy burdens on many people ... instead of what we should be doing ... extending God's amazing grace ... by offering a place of healing and hope and wholeness.

Too often the church is making people's lives worse ... not better.

This communion table that we come to today ... is all about radical welcome for all ... and make no mistake ... this is not our table to decide who can come and who can't ... it is Christ's table ... it is filled with God's spirit that will blow where it will. This table invites us to participate in God's kingdom ... not the world's kingdom.

And so our role as Christians ... as the Body of Christ ... is to continue to set this table ... making sure there are enough places for anyone and everyone ... and then stand back ... and let God work transformation through its mystery.

I wish unity in the Body of Christ was possible in our own time ... and someday I believe it will be ... but until it is ... we must continue each new Lord's Day ... to take a stand ... that the truth of Jesus' teachings are just that.

Let's not lay any more burdens on the shoulders of people who are already weighed down with pain and shame and suffering. Instead let's work hard every day to love God more ... so we can love our neighbors more.

May we be willing to share God's love in awkward places ... and to name injustice in cozy spaces.

Amen.