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Worship Theme: Integrity in Leadership and Servanthood

“Lead A Life Worthy of God”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Season of Pentecost, Sunday, November 1, 2020
James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: 1 Thessalonians 2: 9-13 Matthew 23: 1-12

1 Thessalonians 2: 9-13

⁹You remember our labor and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. ¹⁰You are witnesses, and God also, how pure, upright, and blameless our conduct was toward you believers. ¹¹As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children, ¹²urging and encouraging you and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

¹³We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God’s word, which is also at work in you believers.

Matthew 23: 1-12

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples,

²“The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; ³therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. ⁴They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. ⁵They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. ⁶They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, ⁷and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi.

⁸But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. ⁹And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. ¹⁰Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah.

¹¹The greatest among you will be your servant. ¹²All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

“Lead A Life Worthy of God”

Paul said to the people of Thessalonica

*“As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children,
urging and encouraging you and pleading
that you lead a life worthy of God,
who calls you into God’s own kingdom and glory.”*

Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples,

*“The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat;
therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it;
but do not do as they do,
for they do not practice what they teach.”*

Listen.

Jesus of Nazareth and the Apostle Paul
and those whom you respect and revere
implore us to practice what we preach.

Jesus said to the whole people of God:

Look at the Scribes and Pharisees, the religious leaders of the day.
It’s not all bad, it’s not all bad.

“Here we see the Jewish conviction of the continuity of the faith.

God gave the law to Moses;

Moses handed it down to Joshua;

Joshua transmitted it to the elders;

the elders passed it down to the prophets;

and the prophets gave it to the Scribes and Pharisees.”^[1]

In so far as these religious leaders

taught the great principles and commandments of the Law

-- the Way of Israel which God gave to Moses –
you must obey the Word.

The Word, the *Logos* of God, comes to us from the Spirit,

is born of Love and points us to God’s Love.

Have reverence for the Word, said Jesus.

Have respect for those who teach and embody the Word, said Jesus.

Then Jesus broke it down even further.

Yet look to how they live, He said, pointing to the Scribes and Pharisees.

Look at their attitudes,

their ostentatious living,

their clamoring for titles and the best seats.

Look at the burdens they place upon the people of God.

Consider the rules and prohibitions they make

in turn make other people's lives harder,
and yet do they not seek to ease burdens or bear the load?

*"...therefore, [Jesus said to the people,]
do whatever they teach you and follow it;
but do not do as they do,
for they do not practice what they teach."*

If we stopped the sermon right here, right now,
we could all go home – or if you are already home, go into another room –
feeling mighty superior to the Scribes and Pharisees.
Thank God I am not like them!

All power be to the Creator...

Uh oh, there goes that Jesus fellow, gettin' to meddlin'...

When he finished point out the flaws and foibles of the religious leaders,
he turned his attention to the disciples and crowds.

*"You are all students," He said.
You all have something to learn.
"The greatest among you will be your servant.
All who exalt themselves will be humbled,
and all who humble themselves will be exalted."*

Lead a life worthy of God.
Practice what you preach.
Behave the way you say you believe.

The real concern that Christ is getting at
is not ostentatious outfits or titles;
the real concern is the inner attitude,
the inner Self which controls behaviors,
the inner convictions which dictate to the external practices.

Everything we do and are starts from within.
Leadership in the Christian Community is to be servant leadership.
"Minister" means "servant" (*diakonos*, deacon). [\[2\]](#)

In our congregation's publications we list our staff and ministers.
The staff are those employed by the Church.
The ministers? We say, "All the People"

We are empowered by our baptisms to be servants, all of us,
to be followers of Jesus who calls us to lead by example, in word and deed.

In her song "Straight Up"

Paula Abdul wonders about a beau whose integrity is in doubt.

*“...Am I a page in your history book?
I don't mean to make demands
But the word and the deed go hand in hand
How about some information, please?”*

How about some info?

When it comes to the word and the deed going hand in hand, where do we stand?

In First Thessalonians, Paul picks up where Jesus left off.

Paul is urging, encouraging, pleading
that we lead lives worthy of God,
lives in which what we say and what we do are so in line as to be one.

Leave behind the hypocrisy.

Become people of integrity.

Leave behind saying one thing then doing another.

Become people whose words and actions are one.

On Friday afternoon I clowned around
at the Campbell Stone Retirement Community.

The residents were so glad to get out and about.

There was a joyful explosion of socially distanced human activity,
of snacks and candy, costumes and games.

I made balloon animals and hats or whatever they wanted.

A witch needed a balloon broomstick.

A ghoul asked for a scary flower.

A kind soul in the special care unit requested a floppy balloon crown.

Everything was fine and dandy until -- Bang! -- her balloon crown popped.

Maybe she had a hairpin or a lot of hair spray.

Maybe it was the balloon's time to meet the Maker.

Maybe I goofed in the execution -- no pun intended.

Either way when it popped right beside by her ears
her face lit up and her eyes got real big.

She exclaimed that it was the loudest thing she'd heard in years.

After that she asked if she could have a balloon dog instead.

Happy to oblige.

That afternoon in a calmer, quieter moment

I got a chance to visit with a seminary student from Candler
who was serving as an intern at Campbell Stone.

Asked her what courses she had this semester,
and she mentioned Early Christian Thought.

Early Christian Thought.

I wonder, I said to her, I wonder how often

do today's Christian pastors and the practitioners of the Faith
draw upon the original Christian theologians,

the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Century church writers,
rule setters, philosophers of religion,
those who's insights and clarifications,
prejudices and prophetic visions
shaped the Church of Jesus Christ for centuries.

Early Christian Thought.

You know what our spiritual forbearers wrestled with?

Guess which thorny issue was a constant challenge,

both a moral dilemma and practical impediment for the Early Church?

That's right.

You nailed it.

Integrity.

Hypocrisy.

Practicing what they preached.

Leading a life worthy of God.

Origen was a Christian scholar and theologian from Alexandria.

“In the third century,

Origen excoriated bishops who failed to act as religious examples
and sympathetic physicians of the soul...” [\[3\]](#)

Origen excoriated church leaders “who were rather worldly minded,
pursued earthly occupations and affairs,

longed for wealth, were haughty, quarrelsome, and self-assertive.

They loved to be flattered, said Origen,

and were less conscientious in the conduct of business than secular officials.”

“...if anyone tried to bring them to account for their sins,
they formed cliques and, if need be, anti-churches,
so that they could hold on to their offices.”

“...They refused to take advice from their equals,

much less a layperson or a pagan,
and are, in sum, just like the Pharisees of old.”

“...Back in the 3rd Century we see the first time

Christian clergy are compared to the same Pharisees that Jesus pointed to
[and, sadly,] it would be far from the last time.”

Corruption takes many forms.[\[4\]](#)

Corruption of our beliefs into unbelief is a form.

Corruption of our behavior into misbehavior is one more form.

Corruption of our integrity into hypocrisy is yet another.

“You may fool all the people some of the time,” said Abraham Lincoln.

*“You can even fool some of the people all the time;
but you can't fool all of the people all the time.”*

“What is morally wrong can never be politically right,” said Lincoln.

Consider a contemporary ideology that is immoral, which is morally wrong,
a teaching which has affected how we relate to one another,
an ideology that has permeated our churches, communities and country.
It’s grown deep roots in our religion and politics and personal relationships,
one that reeks of hypocrisy,
one that shall only be overcome
by a people united in our intent on becoming integrity personified.

We speak here, now, of the concept that others are out to get you and yours.

We speak of the idea that other people around you want to take advantage of you,
that others are out to deny your way of being,
take away your community, your job, your identity,
your religion, your freedom.

Some political and religious leaders shout, *“Watch out!*
The other side wants to take away what matters the most to you:
your values, your church, your suburbs,
your freedom of speech, your religion,
your guns, your bullets, your right to bear arms,
your prerogative to deny a service to those you hate.
And only I can protect you.”

Such an idea, the concept that other people, THEM!,
dearly desire to take away what you have
for whatever reason, is a social phenomenon of paranoia fed by fear.

The idea that the “other side” wants to take away what you have
feeds on deep-seated feelings:

feelings of insecurity,
feelings of mistrust,
feelings of anger, prejudice and shame.

It feeds on our fear of scarcity, fear of loss, fear of being lost, of losing, of being all alone.

It’s fed by those who have a lot

and want to divide those who have very little
or who have some but want some more.

And it’s fed by some who are intent on keeping us apart,
driving a wedge between those souls

who really, truly, deeply have more in common that they (we!) dare to
imagine.

Let the Church of Jesus Christ rise up to declare
that following or hankering or giving credence to such an ideology
can only be described as hypocritical
of the Christian Faith,
a Faith that is grounded in love, trust,

and one God of all creation.

Jesus Christ, the Apostle Paul, Origen of Alexandria, and this significant congregation
are speaking together today of integrity and being faithful Christians.
The name Christian should be synonymous with integrity, justice, mercy, grace.

Yet the airwaves resound with the noise of civic and religious leaders
who teach & preach, pontificate & publicize & proliferate on social media
such a corrupt, immoral wrong
and who are so often, too often claiming the title: Christian.

Such hypocrisy does devastating damage
to Jesus' name and mission and community of faith.

There is nothing that makes it harder for me to do my role as a congregational pastor,
or for us to live out our role and responsibility as faithful followers of Jesus,
than to have to constantly differentiate
between the integrity we seek to emulate
and the hypocrisy the world witnesses.

Our neighbors witness flagrant hypocrisy of so-called Christian leaders,
be they politicians or preachers or Wall Street's Masters of the Universe,
and paint the Church with one broad brush stroke: hypocrites.

I don't know about you, but whenever I hear such a message
I stand up and say, "*He or She or They do not speak for me!*"

That is not the God I know and love!
The God I choose to follow calls us to be humble, revere the Word, respect one another.

That is not the America I know and love!
The America I claim allegiance to
is "*one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.*"

That is not the Humanity I know and love!
The Humanity with which we share this sunlit planet
also shares the same God known by many names,
the same air and oceans,
same common denominator: Africa is our shared Motherland.

"*You are all students,*" said Jesus.
You all have something to learn.
Practice what you preach.
The whole world is watching, waiting, listening,
hoping for integrity to be made real
through what you say and how you act.

Be not afraid!
Rather than preaching or practicing like someone else – the proverbial THEM! --

want to take away your freedom, or values, or rights,
be brave!
cast out fear,
walk by faith,
embody a humble spirit.

Here and now, together,
we take a stand.
The Word of God and the deeds we do
go hand in hand.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

^[1] William Barclay, The Gospel of Matthew, Vol. 2., Westminster Press, 1975. P. 284-285

^[2] Boring and Craddock, The People's New Testament Commentary, WJK, 2004. P. 89.

^[3] Richard John Neuhaus, "The Pastor as Disciplined Christian", republished in William Willimon's Pastor, A Reader, Abingdon, 2002. P. 291.

^[4] Ibid. P. 291.