

“Serve to be Seen”
June 1, 2008
Geneseo United Methodist Church
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Matthew 23:5-12 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.

We have all seen them. You know, the “I” people. I this. I that. I the other thing. The I of self-exaltation. The I that says I am more important than you.

Some can be identified by the way they dress, walk, and talk. They dress to kill, everything pressed, no dandruff or cat hair to be seen. Their face freshly shaved or make-up toned to perfection. They walk with their nose to the wind, and their chest flexed to the front. Their strut says, “I’m all that.” And while some of these descriptions are generalized and don’t fit every “I” person, the thing that really gives them away, is their talk.

In conversation with an I person, the rest of us simply diminish into nothingness. Our little acts of kindness, soft spoken nature, and gentle spirit simply feel overpowered by the “I” of another individual.

The “I” person that I am talking about, is the person that thinks everything in the world revolves around them. Can all of you relate? Maybe you can think of someone like that. Maybe you have been that person at one point in your life. I think we can all fall into a selfish mindset on occasion.

This passage is a profound one. Jesus notices the behavior of the Pharisees and temple leaders, and he calls their pride and their yearning for significance, bogus.

Look at the way they dressed. Has anyone here ever worn a phylactery? No? I had no clue what it was, so I had to look it up. I found out that a phylactery was a kind of prayer shawl, a cloth that was worn to lead the Jews in their praying.

There was the ordinary cloth, and then there were these scribes and Pharisees who made theirs gaudy and ostensible. It was all about the appearance. They wanted people to notice that they were important because of the size, color, and cords of their phylactery. They kind of shouted “hey look at how important I am.”

It would be comparable to the red carpet that is rolled out for the Hollywood stars on special award nights, the big deal that everyone makes out of their clothing and their dress. It is all about, “look how important I am.”

Jesus goes on to degrade the leaders because of their haughty attitude and their demand to be treated as the most important people ever to walk on the face of the earth. Hmm, there are still people like that today, and unfortunately many of our children idolize them, and want to be just like them. Look at the live drama of T.V. today. Even the name American Idol tells us what it is about. There are so many other shows just like it that I just won't go there

A parallel could also be drawn to politicians or candidates who say certain things, or do something just to get attention and a positive light spun on them.

But you see, the problem is not just with those trying to be seen, but also with those who are giving them elevated status. Those who watch, those who rate, those who even desire to dress like, sing like, dance like, speak like, or become an idol themselves.

On this point Jesus is very clear. He tells us no person is to be elevated above another. He says, no one should be called teacher, or father, or instructor. These were all terms of honor and respect in Jesus day. They were the ways that the temple leaders were referred to as a matter of respect. But Jesus said, No, for there is only one teacher, one father, one instructor – God.

Jesus points out that only humility and service brings a person glory. That in fact self exaltation will bring a great measure of embarrassment.

Today we have a few good comparisons I would like to point out. First are the people who served in Parkersburg and other tornado effected areas over the past week. They did not go to receive a reward, or recognition. They simply went to serve and to care for those in great need.

Or, the Sunday school teachers we just recognized. Do you think that they started the year out by saying, “This will get me a lot of recognition.” Somehow I don’t think so, or we would have a lot more people volunteering.

If you noticed, the cloths that were handed to them were not ornate or colorful; they were simple white cloths that represented service. This is the kind of person that Jesus says is the greatest among us. Verse 11 says, “the greatest among you will be your servant.”

This church, I believe is filled with silent and humble servants. People who push the snow, mow the yard, cook and serve the meal, vacuum the carpet, spread the gravel, pump the water out of the basement, teach a class, head a committee, or organize a function. The list goes on and on.

Unfortunately many people outside the church, who are not Christians don’t see that kind of service, because it is being done in a silent and humble manner. What they see are the scribes and Pharisees in very public places, at the entrance to faith.

They see the proud T.V. Evangelist who shouts out loud acclamations of self-worth and piety. They may not be wearing phylacteries, but you can see it in their clothes, their walk, their talk, they are “I” persons.

Or they see the pastor at their local church stand up and declare that they have all the answers to the world’s problems, everyone just has to become like them.

Or the person they meet at the school football game invites them to church putting on a good show, all while telling the story about how they are better than the neighbor who goes to that other church.

People are too smart today, they can see through Christian hypocrisy, they can see through the phylacteries of outward appearance.

If Christians are going to be seen as great, and something that others desire to become, we should do the exact opposite of what the world tells us. Instead of exalting ourselves to look good, we should serve others in silence and humility. Amen.