

SERMON

Rev. John Sovereign

Jesus put a lot of energy into contending with the faith of his day. Pharisaism, a caricature in the New Testament, was tightly focussed on right theology and right action, a kind of religious legalism that crippled the Pharisees ability to hear Jesus clearly.

At one point Jesus accused them of holding to traditions and not knowing the heart of God.¹ At another he screamed "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!"²

On Monday I was buying a small order at Freshco. One of the rough looking locals who hangs around the parking lot was just ahead of me in line, buying ice cream on sale. I literally paid it forward by buying his order, about 8 dollars. Everyone laughed, the cashier thought it was cute. As I left, I noticed he went straight to the lottery kiosk to buy a ticket.

First of all, I must tell you that poor people spend a lot of money on lottery tickets. For them a big win spells the end of financial

¹Mark 8: 6-8 "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.' You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."

²Matthew 23:23-24 NKJV

misery. But second of all, I thought how easy it would be to go over and ask him what he is doing, and upbraid him for wasting his money, my money in fact. My privilege would enable me to buy many tickets without anyone speaking to me. But I could have pointed out to him that he has no privilege, that he lives on the system, that he lives on my generosity. But to say anything would have been wrong of me.

A friend of mine, an American pastor, published a meme to Facebook Tuesday. Please forgive me for mentioning Donald Trump. Trump is not my reason for citing it.

It read

“People say that I am Anti-Trump. That isn’t the real story.

I am pro-humanity.

I am pro-diversity.

I am pro-decency.

I am pro-equality.

I am pro-compassion.

I am pro-justice.

That this almost always leaves me in direct opposition to this President is simply a sad by-product.”³

While my wife was receiving chemo at the Cancer Centre Tuesday, I asked others who were also there with us - it took almost 5 hours for chemo - their thoughts on kindness. Words like neighbourliness, goodness, helping people, doing little things for nothing were brought up. It was mentioned that Ellen DeGeneres always closes her show with “Be kind.”

³ John Pavlovitz - johnpavlovitz.com

St Matthew's January 23, 2020

We talked about giving a few dollars to the homeless and how not to let them use it for drugs. Or how to buy a meal but not give cash. It was for me a rather mundane litany, because everyone already knows these things.

When Paul was shipwrecked on Malta, the inhabitants showed him and the crew kindness. They are remembered fondly in the narrative, even though they were not likely Jewish, nor Christian, just Maltese. Kindness was given without thought or reference to belief system or duty. It was who the Maltese were: they were kind people, hospitable, accepting. Almost perhaps, in the sense Jesus is kind.

Jesus tells a story that reminds us of people today. Always excuses, always feeling like the world is a buffet catering just to them. Perhaps people have always been this way, otherwise the story would not resonate through the ages. You can turn down the cake at a buffet, but when it's offered to you by the Lord of Life, you best take it.

The owner of a house put on a great dinner but the expected guests turned him down. So he invited the poor, the crippled, the blind, the needy. He had his slave compel anyone that would listen to come to the banquet, and they came!

These were strangers to him. They were diverse. Some were alienated from family, some travelling to family. Some were homeless. Some were in debt. Some were gay. Some might have been lepers. Some outlaws. Some addicted. Some filthy. Some lonely. And some didn't love the God of Israel but it didn't matter.

The world today is rapidly changing, and becoming more and more unstable. It is time to be like the owner of the house, and pay less attention to holiness by isolation and more attention to holiness by diversity. Less attention to those traditions and doctrines that divide us, and more attention to inclusion. Less focus on the white knuckle club of perfection, and more focus on the elasticity of love and kindness. Less attention to protecting our past pride and more attention to presenting the image of Jesus to the world and in the world.

Scripture provides the basis and the model for doing so. When I grew up, there was a teaching abroad in the church that the bible is not to be questioned. We recited a statement of faith that began with an infallible bible, which we almost worshipped. That is not how Jesus did it, nor is it how the early Church did it.

If we are to show kindness, then we must also be prepared to push boundaries, to see differently, and to be constantly struggling to interpret the scriptures in the light of emerging and evolving understanding and truth.

Faith is about what it means to follow Jesus, in our own generation, and freely.

It is a shame when we are not accepting of differences in sexual orientation and gender identity, or religious belief, or tradition, or skin colour and looks, or wealth and status. It is disgraceful when we refuse to own white privilege, or to think Frank Sinatra's song "I Did It My Way" is something to brag about.

"There but for the grace of God go I" can be applied to all of us,

including Horgan, Trudeau, Trump, Putin, and me.

I read an article in Maclean's Magazine⁴ this week. Its title was 'LGBTQ People and 'the harm being done by the Christian religion'. It was a good article.

What caught my eye was a statement by Charles Fensham, professor of systematic theology at Knox College, University of Toronto. I quote, "The inner rupture between the teaching and attitude of my church and my experience as a gay man became unbearable."

We have to reconcile our beliefs, our theologies, and our traditions with a faith and a God who intentionally invites to the kingdom those who are the least. And the invitation does not imply that these are to be recreated in the likeness of us - the healthy, wealthy and respectable. The demand is that we be kind, that we be inclusive of diversity, that we be gentle and loving and at ease. There is no agenda of salvation, that is God's prerogative. The invitation is open and non-coercive, it's free to those who accept.

Some of you will argue that scripture cannot be broken. I ask then, why the contention throughout the scriptures between belief and revelation? Why the great emphasis on the truth? Why God's interest in those we consider outside the faith, or reprobate, or common sinners, even atheist?? Why the use of the religious as foils for the righteousness of the faithful?

⁴ LGBTQ people and 'the harm being done by the Christian religion', Maclean's Magazine, January 17, 2020. Michael Cohen

A confrontation and a judgement is coming upon the earth. I suspect it will be nasty for a lot of people. I don't think it will be so much about doctrine and even theology as it will be about whether or not we really bear the image of Jesus. That image is not available outside the work of God, nor is it fixed in time as if God had left us.

So I rejoice because in Jesus we have an ally for the whole human race, who loves us one and all, who is found by those who do not seek him⁵.

I rejoice too because God is a God of compassion, who calls others by name, not just me, and who counts the hairs on every head.

I rejoice because God knows those who are his, and God is kind. My message today: be teachable, be kind, love Jesus..

⁵Romans 10:20 Then Isaiah is so bold as to say, "I have been found by those who did not seek me; I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me."