

**First United Methodist Church  
618 Eighth Street  
Columbus, IN 47201**

**Rev. Howard E. Boles  
November 18, 2018**

“A Fashionable Faith”  
Text: Mark 12:38-44

One afternoon a United Methodist pastor received a phone call. On the other end was the voice of a woman sobbing. The pastor tried to comfort her to find out why she was crying. Composing herself, the woman explained that her beloved dog had died. She was calling to see if the pastor would perform a funeral for her pet.

Now this United Methodist pastor was not particularly patient with her request. He thought about all the important things he needed to do and felt that this was not one of them. He decided to pass the buck. He said to the woman, “Perhaps you should call the Presbyterian pastor or the Episcopal priest down the street.” The woman took down their phone numbers and thanked the pastor. Before hanging up she said, “I just have one more question. I’ve never had to do this before and presume that I should compensate them for their troubles. Do you think a thousand dollars would be enough?”

The pastor quickly replied, “Wait a second, you didn’t tell me your dog was Methodist!”

While humorous, it also indicates the issue in this morning’s gospel reading. The proper thing to do would have been to offer comfort, regardless of any compensation. Isn’t that what churches are supposed to do? Isn’t that what clergy as supposed to model? I recognize that we are all human and therefore imperfect, but our goal is to live in such a way that the things we profess are matched by the way we live our daily lives. It is about a consistency.

A few weeks ago, following the shooting at the Jewish Temple in Pittsburgh, I heard that there was to be a community service at the local Temple. It was open to everyone as a way of showing our support in this time of loss and grief. I had decided that I wanted to attend. But just prior to the start time, it was dark and rainy. I thought of all the reasons not to attend. I thought about staying inside in the comfort of my home. But I felt that I needed to be there. It would be important not only to show solidarity with my Jewish neighbors, but it would be meaningful for me personally.

The service was deeply moving, with many speakers and statements of hope from various faith traditions. One of the leaders from the local Temple shared that there is a Jewish tradition of washing the body after a person dies. They lovingly clean the body and dress the deceased for a proper burial.

Another important rule is that the body is never to be left alone. Jewish law states that the deceased must be accompanied at all times. This is done out of respect. To leave them alone would be a sign that no one cares for them. So, there is always someone, or more likely multiple people, who volunteer to remain with the body until the burial.

The speaker explained that this was considered one of the truest forms of compassion. Because the recipient is dead, there is no way that they can ever repay you for this act of kindness. You just do it out of respect.

When I think about what faith stands for, this is an example of that faith at its highest. And I say that in the broadest sense of understanding. I would like to associate that kind of compassion with Jews, Muslims, Buddhists and most certainly with Christians. It is the very embodiment of the common elements of our faiths.

We can say that the church is loving, but that isn't enough. We can say that the church is compassionate and caring and welcoming, but that isn't enough. For all that we profess, we have to back it up with our actions. We have to embody love and kindness and hospitality and forgiveness.

That is the problem Jesus is addressing in the gospel lesson. It is another in a long line of issues Jesus had with the religious leaders of his time. Their problem was not a lack of knowledge. They were wise beyond measure. They knew the scriptures forward and backwards and could recite verses from heart. Their problem was not faith for they were among the most faithful people you would ever want to meet. Their problem was that they didn't put this faith and knowledge into practice.

They often disagreed with Jesus' actions. While the scriptures made it clear that one was to care for the poor, the widow, the orphan the religious leaders often limited this care. They took advantage of the poor through the Temple practices. They were modest in their support of those in need.

One theologian refers to Jesus' example as "the scandal of God's grace." While most religious leaders would agree that God's love and grace extended to all people, they often drew boundaries as to who was worthy of that love and grace. But for Jesus love knew no boundaries. A Samaritan woman was worthy of his respect. A tax collector was worthy as a dinner companion. A leper was worthy of an act of kindness. His kindness knew no boundaries.

In the reading from Mark 12, Jesus points out that the religious leaders valued appearance over substance. They loved to walk around in long robes so that they stood out among the crowds. They liked to be greeted with respect in the marketplace and to have the best seats in the synagogues. At a formal dinner, they wanted to have the seats of honor.

In that brief sentence, you can hear the underlying issue. Their focus was on how they were treated. They wanted respect, deference, notice. It was all about appearances. But there was nothing about wanting that same respect for the people around them.

This is what writer Wendell Berry refers to as a fashionable faith. It is a faith that wants all the trappings of looking good without having to get their hands dirty in the difficulties of life. It loves the enemy in abstract without engaging in the difficult task of forgiveness and reconciliation among real life enemies. A fashionable faith seeks to help those in need but from a safe distance. A fashionable faith looks good on paper, but seldom makes an impact upon the world around it.

In a collection of sermons entitled, “With God in the Crucible”, the former head of the South African Council of Churches and a Methodist Bishop, Peter Storey tells about visiting a black parishioner during the height of apartheid in South Africa. He had to pull some strings to even be allowed into the prison.

Inside, he was able to meet with his parishioner, although a guard remained in the room with them at all times. As the visit neared its conclusion, they prepared for communion. Rev. Storey explained to the guard that Methodists always invite everyone to participate. The black prisoner drank from the cup first and then passed it to the white guard. After a long pause, he took the cup and drank from it. As he was preparing to leave, Rev. Storey said that Methodists always hold hands when they pray. So, once again, the black prisoner and the white guard were brought together holding hands with one another.

In this simple visit, Rev. Storey had brought mutual respect and compassion to both the prisoner and to the guard. Unlike the system of apartheid which viewed one person as more important than the other, our faith says that we are all beloved children of God, worthy of respect.

What we believe is important. But how we live is even more important. The religious leaders of Jesus time knew the right things to say. But they, like all of us, sometimes failed to live up to those things. What Jesus called for was a consistency between the things that we profess and the ways that we live our daily lives.

What does it look like to practice God’s forgiveness? What would it look like to live lovingly toward all we meet? How would our conversations differ if kindness was always at the center of how we treated one another? Or to put it more succinctly, what would it look like if we practiced what we professed? It would mean valuing what is right over what is popular. It would mean doing the right thing without expecting any personal payoff.

In the powerful moment in Harper Lee’s book, “To Kill a Mockingbird,” attorney Atticus Finch has agreed to represent a black man in accused of raping a white girl. The novel is set in the deep South during the 1930’s. There are many in town that are angry that Atticus has agreed to represent this man. They would prefer to mete out their own form of vigilante justice and skip the formal legal proceedings. Atticus is highly unpopular among the townspeople for taking this case.

Although he tries to protect his young children from these comments, they cannot help but hear them. His daughter, Scout engage in a powerful conversation about this decision to represent Tom Robinson. Atticus tells her, “Scout, I couldn’t go to church and worship God if I didn’t try to help that man.” Scout protests that he must be mistaken because so many people have a differing view.

With a gentle kindness Atticus tells her, “They’re certainly entitled to think that, and their entitled to the full respect of their opinions...but before I can live with other folks I’ve got to live with myself. The one thing that doesn’t abide by majority rule is a person’s conscience.”

If it were only about appearances, Atticus could sit in church on Sunday morning and read the prophetic writings about God's justice with a clear conscience. But, it is also about practicing these things we believe.

Once while my son and I were having a lunch together we spied a man enter the restaurant and begin to ask for spare change from the patrons. The man was disheveled and unsteady on his feet. He made it to a couple of tables before the manager came out and told him he had to leave. It was then that I recognized him. It was Kenny, a man who sometimes attended our church. Kenny was a bright, talented, hardworking man. He was also an alcoholic.

The manager was escorting him out of the building, but Kenny had not seen me. I could have continued my lunch justifying my inaction because I had helped him multiple times before or because Kenny had gotten himself into this problem. I could have just ignored the problem and I must confess that I entertained that thought.

But then the better part of me kicked in. I got up and asked the manager to let Kenny sit with my son and me. Kenny proceeded to eat the rest of our food, saying that he hadn't eaten anything in days. When the lunch was paid for, we returned to our home and talked about next steps. Kenny agreed that he needed to go to rehab. We called several facilities before we found a place that would accept him. I drove him to the facility and waited while they got him checked in.

I would love to tell you that Kenny got better and stayed sober. He didn't. He would continue the cycle of sobriety and binge drinking several more times. But for the day, he was safe. He was in a safe place, not living on the streets, not going without food.

It is easy to say that we believe in loving one another, caring for those in need, seeking justice for those who are oppressed, caring for those who are hurting. The difficult task is putting that into practice.

The scripture where Jesus encourages this doesn't end with a blessing for those who live such a faith. There is no tidy ending that says, "Blessed are those who love their enemies, forgive those who hurt them, bring justice to the poor or refugee among us." I believe that there is no tidy ending because the true reward is the satisfaction of knowing that we did the right thing. Like those who remain with the deceased bodies, we do this not because anyone will ever repay us, but simply because our faith assures us that it is the right thing to do. May that faith guide our actions and give us courage to be a people filled with love and kindness, grace and peace.