

Beware!
March 10, 2013
Luke 20:45-47

In the hearing of all the people he said to the disciples, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets. They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

It seems that warnings are all around us. If you pick up any product with chemicals it comes with a warning. WARNING: OVEN CLEANER CAN DAMAGE YOUR EYES! We warn our kids about strangers. We are warned in our workplace about misconduct. We are warned about the dangers of inactivity and poor diets. We are warned about the impact of too much television and too little time at the family table. We have tornado warnings and severe winter storm warnings. Warnings tell us to pay attention, be aware, and use caution.

The word BEWARE communicates the same thing and in our scripture reading for today Jesus is issuing a warning to his disciples. BEWARE Jesus says of how easy it is to get caught up in being religious to the point of losing your religion.

That's what happened to the scribes. They got caught up in all the wrong things. They enjoyed being treated like royalty. They enjoyed the privilege of being honored guests. They could put on quite a show when they prayed. They were so caught up in the pretense they lost sight of the very people they were called to serve. Jesus accused the scribes of devouring the houses of widows. If we were to read on in Luke we would read the story of the widow's mite. We would see this poor widow put everything she had in the temple treasury. And we would hear Jesus say, "This is what I am talking about. The scribes are supposed to be taking care of her – not the other way around!"

"BEWARE", Jesus says, "don't let this happen to you!" And we know, he is talking to us.

Last fall Pew Research released its findings on religious affiliation. 46 million Americans now write the word NONE by religious affiliation. One third of all people under the age of thirty claim no religious affiliation. One of the reasons is the very thing Jesus warns against – the people who claim to be religious are some of the most unloving, judgmental hypocrites these young adults know – too many Christians are bullies – more concerned with being right than being loving. Too many Christians so enjoy privilege they forget those who have no access to such privilege. When religion is used to discriminate, dominate, intimidate, and mandate it's no wonder why folks say, "Forget it!"

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I could give you lots of ugly examples. People who have been turned away, rejected, abused by religious people. I'm sure you could give me lots of ugly examples. We know it happens. What I think is more important is trying to figure out how not to let it happen to us. How do we keep from becoming the very thing Jesus warns us not to become?

1. Apply the rule of compassion to all matters. What is the compassionate response?
2. Continual self-examination
3. Become a life-long student desiring to grow.
4. Watch your language.
5. Be sincere (flawed, imperfect, vulnerable, transparent)
6. Pray
7. Be part of a community that practices all of the above.

So let's go through these one by one.

Compassion: Compassion is the central teaching of Christianity. Compassion encompasses the Golden Rule and love of neighbor, even when that neighbor is an enemy. The story of the Good Samaritan is such a wonderful example of this. The story is about a man who is beaten, robbed, and left for dead. Two religious people walk by and have all kinds of religious reason not to help. A Samaritan, who was considered an enemy of the Jews, comes by and he shows compassion. Which one, Jesus asks, is doing God's will? Which one is compassionate?

Dave has fun saying that he has met many people who have been born again in a most unattractive way. There is nothing attractive about a person claiming to be a Christian acting hatefully toward another human being.

Continual Self-Examination: Jesus said you can't pick the splinter out of someone else's eye when you have a log in your own. We have to be willing to take a good hard look at ourselves. Are we prejudiced? Are we jealous? Are we proud? Are we greedy? Are we mean? Are we stingy? Are we wasteful? Are we unforgiving? The scribes couldn't see how proud and greedy they had become because they didn't want to see it. They were unwilling to look in the mirror.

The 139th Psalm ends with these words:
"Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my thoughts.
See if there is any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting."

Commit to being a life-long student: There is always more to learn – always. Our darkest moments can be fertile soil for new growth and new life. Jesus said, "Seek first the kingdom of God and God's righteousness." To seek is to continually strive.

The reason people don't like to grow is because growth means change – it means that learning new things can take us out of our comfort zones and lead us into times of confusion and questioning. Too often we choose to be comfortable rather than to grow and challenge our existing beliefs and knowledge.

There is an expression that says; the more you know the more you know you don't know. The same is true for faith. There is a certain kind of humility that comes in knowing that you don't have all the answers.

Watch your language: Whoever said, “Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me,” was absolutely wrong! We are finally wising up to the fact that words can wound for a lifetime. I often hear people complain about “having to be politically correct” with their language – as if it is a chore. I would say that if you have a problem being politically correct that you might think of it in spiritual terms. How best can we honor our neighbor with our words? It shouldn’t matter if it is an inconvenience to you – compassion is often inconvenient.

If you want to see the impact of words and labels – go to school. A student’s entire academic career can be shaped by one label. Vicious words destroy lives.

Be sincere: I learned this week that the antonym for hypocrisy in scripture is the word sincere. In this case, to be sincere means to be honest about who you are. Stop expending energy living a double life and present your flawed self to God as a vessel of God’s Holy Spirit. Hypocrisy means to act or to wear a mask.

I am always grieved by those folks who feel like they have to put on an act at church. This is a hospital for sinners not a museum for the saints. This is where we come to get real and stop living a lie. When you stop pretending you are something you are not – God can finally do something with you.

Pray: Prayer doesn’t change God, it changes us. That is why we pray – to be changed. When we pray for others and our world we are also asking how we might become agents of healing.

We learned in our Pastor’s Class retreat that there are many ways to pray and that prayer is a conversation with God. We can’t fake God out or lie – God knows our hearts so we might as well be honest. Paul tells us to “pray constantly,” which means that we are to breathe every breath and walk every step knowing that God is in front of us, above us, behind us, beside us.

Be part of a community that practices all of the above: I can see why so many folks confuse the body of Christ with a religious institution, especially when we talk about going to church rather than being the church.

What I want to say to all 46 million NONES is that when a community of people practice all of the above – lives are changed, wounds are healed, broken hearts are mended, the lost are found, the empty are filled, and widows keep their houses. It is in community that we learn from each other and we practice what we learn. It is in community that we experience radical grace and a warm embrace. It is in community that we remember every week to be the people Jesus calls us to be...because when we don’t remember we lose our way.

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“It's discouraging to think how many people are shocked by honesty and how few by deceit.”
— Noël Coward, *Blithe Spirit*

“Never start a sentence with the words 'No offense.’”
— Gretchen Rubin

“We are all hypocrites. We cannot see ourselves or judge ourselves the way we see and judge others.”
— José Emilio Pacheco

“The fierce words of Jesus addressed to the Pharisees of His day stretch across the bands of time. Today they are directed not only to fallen televangelists but to each of us. We miss Jesus' point entirely when we use His words as weapons against others. They are to be taken personally by each of us. This is the form and shape of Christian Pharisaism in our time. Hypocrisy is not the prerogative of people in high places. The most impoverished among us is capable of it. Hypocrisy is the natural expression of what is meanest in us all.”
— Brennan Manning

“Christians have their own Jihads - holy wars. Instead though of killing people physically, they kill them with their words, with their rejection, with their hatred, with their hypocrisy. All in the name of what? Religion?”
— ek

4 types

poser – appearances

pusher – wants or forces others to do what he/she is not willing to do

preventer – keeping people away from the KOG, obstacles and stumbling blocks

preoccupied – cleans outside of cup

without hypocrisy – to be sincere

Best compliment to a Christian – he/she is sincere

self-deceit

person who has a public face

Once upon a time a fox was roaming in a forest in search of food. Unfortunately he was caught up in a trap. He tried his best to get free. Heaving to get out of the trap, he was able to do so but lost his tail in the struggle. The fox felt very small. He knew that every fox would laugh at him. He was so sad that he thought of killing himself. But then he said to himself, “It is cowardice to kill oneself. I should do something else.”

At last the fox planned to persuade all the foxes to part with their tails. It was sure to divert their attention from his tail less appearance. So, the fox called a meeting of the foxes and advised them to do away with their tails. He said, "They are ugly, heavy and tiresome. We must get rid of them."

But one clever fox said, "Good,sir ! you wouldn't be so keen to give us that advice, if you were not tail less. Isn't it ?"

As Sam Goldwyn famously said about acting, sincerity is everything; once you can fake that the rest is easy.