

I wonder

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Vicar,
at the eleven o'clock service October 30, 2011: The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost.
Based on Matthew 23:1-12.*

It is not really supposed to snow in October. Oh, it does sometimes, a trace back in 2002, some small but measurable amount almost sixty years earlier in 1952. But generally it doesn't. When it does, it gets our attention. There are not always specific conclusions to be drawn from these surprises; usually we just see them as part of some grand randomness that exists somehow within the providence of God or the universe or some combination thereof. But they make us think—about global warming, changing weather patterns, things seeming a bit disordered.

Occupy Wall Street also is out of the ordinary and in a way that is almost as startling as an October snowstorm, it too gets our attention—at its best forcing us to look at ourselves, our culture, pondering what makes us great and what is troubling about us. Living in the midst of the protest as I do—just two blocks away—I have watched it closely and pondered what this movement, whether huge and lasting or gasping for its last cold breath, means about us. It means something, something important that deserves our attention. A devoted watcher of people, I have been particularly intrigued by the reactions of ordinary people, viewing it all from the sidelines.

The downtown Brooks Brothers store looks out over Zuccotti Park. In my one brief outing yesterday I made my way through the barricades into Brooks Brothers to get a sweater, thinking that since it is so hard to get into the store, there might be some bargains. Sure enough—preferred customers got 25% off—opportunity knocked, and I answered! I got into a conversation with the man who helped me with my purchase. He admitted that he is tired of the protestors' presence because it hurts his business, but he said he thought they were mostly nice, peaceful kids and that a lot of what they were saying needed to be listened to. Then we both acknowledged that some of the protestors are as old as we are, which led to a nostalgic moment of remembering the good old days of our protests, an interlude in the conversation that quickly seemed to embarrass both of us. I paid for my overpriced sweater, and he moved on to the next non-protestor. Both of us, I expect, wondered about our lives for a moment, pondering what we stand for, whether we've sold out or just been responsible.

Jesus lived his life like an October snowstorm and a protest in the middle of the Financial Center of the world. Wherever he went, people knew that something out of the ordinary had occurred around them, something that made them pay attention. They didn't always know what to do in response to him, but they knew in his presence the earth around and under them shifted. His message still does that to people.

The easy preaching points in this gospel passage are too obvious to be very interesting: the church and hypocrisy are a natural fit. Jesus exposed hypocrisy; it lived all around him—just like it does among us. And while religious folks don't have the corner on the market for hypocrisy, our version of it is really vile. The Pharisees were not hideous people—they were in fact what we would call fairly progressive. But like most everyone who tries really hard to be religious, then and now, they just missed the mark. And because adherence to the law arguably had replaced for them a relationship with God, their arrogance in trying so hard—and so often succeeding—trumped humility again and again. They liked being known as those who were trying so hard to get it right, and soon they didn't mind getting rushed right in to the front, given the best seats in every gathering, being referred to by honorifics that they secretly (and some quite publicly) liked.

On a side note, I could not get my parishioners on Staten Island to call me Buddy. I would say, "I really prefer to be called Buddy." And they would say, "Oh, sure, Father." The liberal ones eventually called me Father Buddy, which is just tragic, so wrong on many levels that have nothing to do with church!

But there is more to this passage than just a teaching about being puffed up, about hypocrisy, about saying one thing and doing another—though that is probably enough to keep us going and thinking and repenting for a long, long time. Early in this section of the gospel there is a phrase that catches my interest: “They (the Pharisees) tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others.” Very interesting. For many, many people religion still feels heavy, like a burden placed on our shoulders. What a terrible misuse of religion! True religion is about *freeing* people, not burdening them, freeing them—us—to live the lives for which we have been created. Jesus said, “You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.”

The institutionalized practice of religion is often fearful to preach real freedom, for freedom allows—probably even demands—that the participants in the religion challenge the institution when it needs to be challenged. Being freed by our faith to live the lives that Christ calls us to live is much more troubling and challenging than adhering to a rigid code of behaviors. One is a closed system: we either manage to follow the rules or we don’t. The other is a totally exposed life that requires our constant engagement, a life that is measured not by how successfully we check boxes on an external list of religious requirements but by how profoundly we love God, self and others—as the summary of the law reminded us last week.

But being freed by true religion is not easy. In fact it asks everything of us. In traditional Methodism there was an old phrase, which may survive even now, that admonished its faithful followers to “pick up their burden,” a notion that is difficult to translate for our modern ears. For them to pick up their burden was somehow to find their life work, their purpose, and their reason for being. In it, they were told that they would find their genuine joy, a claim that was resonant with the manner in which the rabbis of old regarded the yoke of the law. It was, the rabbis said, the joy, the purpose of their lives to be yoked by the law. In old Methodism the notion was similar. Each of us has some burden (think purpose instead of weight) that is ours to do, ours to accomplish for the sake of the world, for the sake of ourselves, and above all for the sake of God. While it sounds much less glamorous than Joseph Campbell’s notion of “following our bliss,” it is not terribly different.

When we pick up our burden, we take on the life to which we have been called, assuming the life for which we have been created. It is important not to confuse that with religious vocation, which *can* be one’s burden, one’s bliss; but in this sense it has much more to do with the whole of one’s life than simple vocation, even religious vocation. We in the professionally religious class usually don’t say that because secretly we believe that our calling, our burden, is higher than yours—which brings us full circle to Jesus’ fury with the Pharisees’ willingness (which became expectation) to be seated in places of honor and to be called special names.

What is your burden? What is mine? What gets us up everyday and gets us going, what makes us righteously angry, what matters enough to give our lives to? That is the faith story, my friends, not some empty ritual or some challenging set of rules.

It is snowing in October, and the protestors don’t seem to be going away. Extraordinary. I wonder what we are supposed to learn. I wonder.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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