

10-7-18

Mathew 23: 23-26

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A couple of years ago my daughters Emma and Tess and I were all at home sick one day feeling miserable. And of course what do people do when they are at home sick? Watch TV of course! We surfing around to see what was on and we came across the Walt Disney version of the film, “Pollyanna.” Now for those of you who have never seen the movie it is about a young girl named Pollyanna Whittier. Pollyanna has lost both of her missionary parents and has come to stay with her Aunt Polly Herrington who is a very religiously devout woman who follows all of the rules to the letter. On Pollyanna’s first Sunday living with her Aunt they attend worship together and hear Rev. Ford give this sermon.

Video Clip

After this loud, perhaps, a little hair raising sermon I remember my daughters having the same astonished look on their face that Pollyanna had. One of my daughters looked at me and said, “Did he just say all of that in church? I’ve never hear anything like that in church before.”

At one point in the movie, Rev. Ford has a life-changing conversation with Pollyanna. Pollyanna tells Rev. Ford that her father, the missionary, preached only the “happy texts” of the Bible. I feel quite confident that Pollyanna’s father would never have preached [Matthew 23](#), which we heard this morning, because it could hardly be called a “happy text.”

Maybe when you heard Jesus yelling at the Pharisees this morning you about tithing mint, dill and cumin but neglecting the justice, mercy and faith, maybe you thought, “Is this really in the Bible? Wow! Jesus sounds really mad here!”

Another question that pops up in my head is, “Why is Jesus so mad? It sounds like he is mad that the Pharisees are tithing? I thought last Sunday Pastor Eric talked about tithing and why that can be a good thing for our relationship with God.”

The Pharisees are following the letter of the law. They are giving 10% of everything they earn and grow, even the small herbs in their garden. They are giving 10% of their mint back to God’s house to do God’s work. What Jesus is really angry about is that this has lead the Pharisees to neglect justice, mercy, and faith. They look down their noses at the poor and say to themselves, “Well I have already given my tithe.” Perhaps their trust in God is growing shaky because they are trusting that the 10% they have given has fulfilled their obligation to God.

For a little over a year I have been attending a fitness class, usually once a week. The first fitness class I was attending was really hard core. I mean it was really exhausting and every time the instructor would be up front and yell at us, “Nobody can do this for you! Nobody can make you stronger but you! Are you here to change or stay the same? Nobody can change you but you!”

Well a few months ago I started having some lower back pain and I started going to a fitness class to help strengthen my core. What I heard from the instructor there was very different. The core instructor said things like, “If you can do eight reps great, if you can do six reps than that is your personal best for today. Be gentle with your body. If it can’t hold this position for 15 seconds see if your body can hold it for ten. Your body is amazing!”

And from those two experiences I found out something about myself. I found out that I respond better to the gentle affirmative voice saying, “Your body is amazing!” than I do to the yelling voice telling me that , “Nobody can do this for you!” I know that both of these things are true, but one of them motivates me more.

When I was in my first church as a pastor I attended a Stewardship Conference that sort of lit a fire under me to talk to the church council more about our Fall Stewardship Campaign. I came into the council and I gave all of them a budgeting worksheet where they could list their take home pay every month and then what their monthly expenses were such as mortgage utilities, food clothing etc. and of course there was also an item for giving. I told all of the council members to take the budget home, fill it out and then we would schedule one on one meetings so that I could go over the budget with them. By the way you usually only do crazy stuff like this when you are in your twenties.

The conversations revealed things to me that were surprising. One person had medical bills they were still paying off and was unable to give 10%, another person told me that they had gambling debts, and another person

was still paying legal bills from a messy divorce they had gone through. Although the circumstances were different for each of them, the thing they held in common was a deep sense of shame for not being able to give 10% to the church. That was my Pharisee moment where I came in talking about tithing and neglecting the more important matters of mercy, justice and faith.

I don't know where each of you is at this morning. Perhaps you are already tithing and Jesus words to the Pharisees are a word of challenge to you to look and see if you have neglected the important matters of justice, mercy and faith.

Or maybe you are like one of those people in my first church who were carrying around a deep sense of shame for not being able to give 10% to the church. If that is the case for you I want to say, "I know that you are doing the best you can right now."

Often when we are physically, mentally or emotionally unhealthy we turn to a doctor, therapist or counselor to help us get on the path to healing. But what do we do when we are financially unhealthy and its keeping us awake at night? A couple of years ago a couple at a new member class shared with the group how Lutheran Social Services financial counseling program helped them figure out how to handle their debt and how to save up a down payment for a house. I also want to refer you to Lutheran Social Services financial counselors to get you on the pathway to health and wholeness.

A couple of weeks ago I was bringing my daughter Daisy here to preschool in the morning. We had parked over near the walking path at the edge of the parking lot and as we got out of the car a man came along who was walking his dog. Daisy wanted to pet the dog so we went and asked him if she could pet the dog. After petting his dog he said, "I have a question for you. What do you do inside that building over there? I see people coming and going all the time of all ages. Are you having exercise classes in there? (Obviously he had seen our huge Fit For Life sign).

I told him that we weren't having physical exercise classes in here, but we were having spiritual exercise classes to help strengthen our spirits. I told him they were always on Sundays at 9 and 10:45 but other times during the week we have other groups meeting such as choir and Bible Studies and small groups. He smiled and thanked me.

Week after week as we meet here for worship we practice our spiritual exercises of Prayer, worship, Biblical literacy, Spiritual Friendships, Serving and Giving. I know that you do these thing on your own in your daily lives also, but sometimes we need to be here together and remind us that this is how God created us to be.