

**“Learning Leading to Action”**  
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**Medford UMC**  
**Matthew 23:23-27**  
**May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2021**

Let us pray: Holy God, with your Word having been read, allow your Spirit to move through us. Allow us to find clarity in your call on our lives through joining together in community this day. Be ever-present with us here, Lord, as we worship your holiness. Amen.

I love learning. Learning about facts from books, experiences from people, stories from movies, skills from teachers, imagination from children, kindness from animals. My Grandma Joyce used to say something like, “you only learn from listening”. And to a degree she was right, listening is an essential part of growth and change, but so is talking. So is doing. Something that I’ve noticed in myself that I’ve been trying to work on is a fear that keeps me from speaking out sometimes or a fear of doing what I know is right. A fear that there’s maybe one more article I could read or person I could talk to – then I’d be certain about what I was saying. And yes, of course we should constantly be educating ourselves and seeking more clarity, but if we get trapped seeking certainty in our books or newspapers or social media headlines, then what we’re saying should be done and what we’re doing will not match.

We are a denomination built on disrupting broken systems that keep the oppressed vulnerable. It’s the entire reason why our founder, John Wesley, even bothered starting a wave in the Church of England; he felt that Christians were focused so much on “knowing for sure” and not enough on “action”. He was accused of being too methodical with helping the needy. It’s why we’re even called Methodists! It was an insult and he turned it into an identity!

As Methodists, we are part of the World Council of Churches (WCC) which participates in the Peace and Justice Pilgrimage each fall. The mission of this pilgrimage is, and I quote, “to work together in a common quest, renewing the true vocation of the church through collaborative engagement with the most important issues of justice and peace, healing a world filled with conflict, injustice and pain.” The pursuit of peace and justice as the “true vocation of the church”. Why can that often feel like a lost cause or an afterthought? What does this mean in a world filled with racism and violence and marginalization? That pilgrimage starts with a Foundation Day during a Dies Academicus (a week set aside by universities to celebrate academics). It gathers together scholars who are taking what they have learned and are using it to pursue justice and peace! This effort is saying that we can read, and watch, and listen all we want but eventually, we have to actually do something with what we now know, we have to practice what we preach. Even when there’s more to read. Even when we might get it wrong and need to be corrected. It makes me think of a quote from the 15th century, Dutch-German author of “The Imitation of Christ”, Thomas à Kempis who said, “At the Day of Judgement we shall not be asked what we have read but what we have done.”

In today’s text, Christ is just ripping into the scholars, leaders, and the teachers for remaining in their books and ignoring the actual world. They follow the rules, they tithe, they pray, but though they look like good religious folk, their work is for nothing. How dare they even bother knowing what they know with no care as to how it progresses God’s Kingdom, how it can be used as a tool against the evil and injustice in the world? Why even bother learning? This section of text is just a small piece of a long list of Jesus calling them out. The word “hypocrite” that Jesus uses here, comes from the Greek word for “play actor” or “pretender”; the idea of putting up the appearance of being good and faithful all while our hearts and actions (or lack thereof) speaking volumes of hypocrisy. Jesus questions everything and notice that the people he is constantly ripping into are the religious ones, not the “sinners” or “outcasts”. In my own experience, I’ve probably heard the word “hypocrite” used the most when people are talking about Christians. Are we learning what should be done, what the right thing to say is, “love thy neighbor” and all that, but then not doing it? What’s the point of knowing it then?

It can be easy to get so far away from a faith that actually demands something of us. There’s a saying that goes, “If your religion doesn’t change you, you should change your religion.” This is not about learning something in order to prove someone else wrong or to change someone else, what you learn has to change you, has to be a spark of clarity in your own Christian identity. If we learn something and say, “you know, so and so really needs to hear this”, chances are it’s actually us that really needs to hear it, take it in, and let it change us. What we know and do shouldn’t become a source of judging others’ righteousness. It doesn’t mean you suddenly change the whole world, but it asks something of you.

I remember one time I was having a wonderful conversation with a friend about a social issue, and there was something that as soon as I said it out loud, I realized I was wrong. Something about hearing myself saying it. And I paused, horrified by what I had been so sure of in my head, and she looked at me and said, “Words are hard. Try again.” And so I did, I corrected myself, I found clarity on how to talk about a difficult issue simply by letting it leave my head, leave my readings. Does it feel good to get things wrong, to be corrected? No, not really. But it’s so important.

Today’s text has an angry Jesus, which can often make people uncomfortable and you know what? It should! It should make us squirm in our seats, it should make us sweat, and most importantly, it should make us reevaluate. So, I read how such and such structures keep groups of people oppressed, so what? So, I have written pages upon pages on such and such book of the Bible, so what? If I do nothing with it to then help the oppressed and vulnerable with what I know, it means nothing, why even learn about it? The radical nature of Christ is sacrificial so we should do the same. And

note here that Jesus isn't saying to abandon learning, no! "...these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others." The opportunity to learn is a gift, it is an instrument of being the hands and feet of God in collaboration with other gifts, a tool for seeing the world as bigger than we did the day before - but there has to be a point where we close the books, stop reading the endless articles, and get muddy; where we collect what we know and speak out against marginalization. "...For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence." If what we learn is just a means to sit comfortably and try not to stir too many pots, then we might as well have not learned it. It just becomes a continued cycle into extorting those who cry for us to truly be living witnesses to the Good News. We feed into it by simply not being a part of stopping it.

There is a WCC document called "Costly Unity". In it, it states, "Cheap unity avoids morally contested issues because they would disturb the unity of the church. Costly unity is discovering the churches' unity as a gift of pursuing justice and peace. It is often acquired at a price." If what we learn at church, in bible studies, in small groups, isn't used for the tough, messy work of God in the world, then it becomes cheap. If it doesn't risk calling out against sin and violence and division, then it's cheap. The chapter from today's scripture passage ends with a paragraph that could have been written yesterday. Jesus is basically saying, "You think you're so good, that you've separated yourself from them, all this will come upon you." With what we have learned and will learn, are we going to keep it on the page or allow it to do something to who we are in the world? Are we allowing issues to get muddy and complicated so that we don't have to do something about it? Let that discomfort in our stomachs over injustice kindle; don't fight that fire that wants to start just because it's scary. Find clarity in learning, then find clarity in action.