

**Matthew 6:1-6 (NRSV)**

"Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

"So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

"And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

"And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

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Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

Last Saturday at our Leadership Retreat, we spent the day talking about discipleship. We had all read a book that I would

recommend to you called “Simple Church” by Thom Rainer and Eric Geiger – there are a bunch of copies of it floating around right now. The book argues that congregations need to have a clear and simple process for how they make disciples, since making disciples is the main business of the church.

I confessed at the retreat and confess to you now that when I was a layperson and people used to talk about discipleship, just the word itself would scare me. Part of the reason is that being a disciple seemed like a lot of work and I felt like I was already working pretty hard. I wasn't sure that I wanted to take on another self-improvement task.

Another part of the reason was that the word conjured up visions of disciples as being like the people who are described by the Gospel lesson today. Disciples were like spiritual warriors, as the Gospel lesson says “practicing their piety before others in order to be seen by them,” sounding the trumpets because they'd given up chocolate or comic books or the power of speech for Lent. They'd offer long and flowery prayers, look glum and pained and all spiritual and they just made me tired. But there was a sort of pious arms race where if you weren't as holy as they were you were some kind of slacker or spiritual delinquent, and the only way to be holy was to be more like them and that was how they'd suck you in. These were the people that the term, “holier than thou” was invented to describe.

But, at the same time, I also knew that I wanted to be a better person, I wanted to be more like the people in my church who I really did admire. People with some depth, people who showed sober, good judgment, who loved and wanted things that truly had value like quiet and peace of mind and integrity, people who were centered and truthful and fearless but could still laugh and act silly sometimes. I wanted to be more like people who were kind, who could love others without anticipation of gain, whose opinion I

valued, people who really were disciples. I find this is still true. I still want to be a better person, more like the people that I admire, even though some of them are still in high school.

And you see, there is a trap that that the Gospel reading identifies. We talked about it in the middle school Sunday school class last Sunday. The class was talking about some of the outrageous things that Martin Luther said and how they could be misinterpreted. Luther tells us that when we do things that we think will please God, when we do things that we are confident God will find to be beautiful, that's when we are most likely to be going wrong. When we are not afraid, we are not humble – when we are proud we are asking for wrath and judgment because God humbles the haughty. People who call attention themselves with their piety are painting a bull's-eye on their chests.

Think for a moment about the people you know who truly are disciples of Christ, people who model the mind of Christ in their lives and in their interactions with others. What are they like? What traits do they hold in common? And perhaps most important, do we know anything about how they came to be the people they are? Because if the business of the church is to raise up disciples of Christ, it would be good to know more about how to do that.

Certainly we can think of some spiritual disciplines that help to shape our hearts and minds. The contemplative prayer that Barbara Harris has introduced us to, or the four keys that Pastor Wendy introduced us to during Lent last year. The disciplines of silence, of fasting, of prayer all shape us. Simply the act of worship, of opening ourselves to God shapes us as disciples.

The mutual conversation and consolation of fellow believers shapes us as disciples. We share our hopes and our fears and learn that neither our hopes nor our fears are uniquely ours, that we have

many of the same hopes and fears as our brothers and sisters. We learn, too, how other people live differently than we do, cope differently, in both faith and doubt. In interaction with our brothers and sisters we learn new habits of heart and mind and different ways to live.

We grow as disciples by teaching and learning. Each of us has a gift, and some of us have many gifts, gifts that can be shared by teaching and learning, by giving and receiving. When we devote ourselves to learning, we place ourselves in the path of the divine wind, the breath of God. When we devote ourselves to teaching, we become the bearer of God's breath, the Holy Spirit. By teaching we find our unique voice – I always enjoy sitting in on Sunday School classes, partly because some of our best disciples are the teachers and partly because that's how people come to understand what they believe, by teaching. I recall a phrase from social psychology that is even truer applied to faith: "How do I know what I think or believe until I see what I say?"

And we are a special kind of tool in God's hands – we are shaped by the uses to which we are put. If we place ourselves in God's hands by serving our brothers and sisters, we are shaped as disciples. The people I admire as disciples tend to think less of themselves and more about the needs of others, and the lovely irony is that by attending to others we nurture our own growth as disciples. We allow God to shape us by our experiences in service.

This was the message that emerged from the leadership retreat – we grow as disciples by loving God in worship and study; we grow as disciples by loving one another in small groups of believers; we grow as disciples by teaching and learning, and we grow as disciples by serving those in need. Are there other ways we grow as disciples? Of course there are.

This is an invitation to a journey this Lenten season, a journey of discipleship. As a congregation we want to become better disciples of Christ and we want to intentionally encourage our growth as disciples. How do we do that? We'll be discussing this in our Lenten Soup and Study on Wednesday evenings and in sermons through Lent and beyond. We approach this task humbly because we know that God humbles the haughty. We know, too, that the job of becoming a discipling church is never done, not this side of the great feast, because we live in a broken world and participate in its brokenness. Dust we are and to dust we will return. But we are dust that God loves, that God sent his son to save and for that we say, "Thanks be to God."

Amen.