



“Living with Integrity”

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Eden United Church of Christ
Hayward, California***

***Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
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Matthew 23:1–12 (ILL)***

Dr. Stephen Patterson is one of the more intelligent and well-credentialed academics in the United Church of Christ today. He has degrees from Yankton College, Harvard University, and Claremont School of Theology. During his graduate school days he was granted fellowships from Harvard, Claremont, and Fulbright.

Stephen taught at Loyola Marymount in Los Angeles, Eden Seminary in St. Louis, and two seminaries abroad, one in India and the other in Ghana, before accepting a post as the George H. Atkinson Professor of Religious and Ethical Studies at Willamette University in Salem, Oregon, last year.

By all accounts, Stephen is a very smart guy with a lot of fancy education, awards, and teaching credentials to prove it.

I came to know Stephen and his spouse, Deborah, through their involvement in an executive leadership development program that I used to manage during the years that I served on the UCC national staff.

Deborah is a very intelligent person in her own right, and an accomplished hospital administrator. She now serves as the Executive Director of the National Parish Nurse Center.

One day while I was observing the class that they were teaching, I overheard Stephen explain the important role that leaders play in aligning an organization’s espoused mission, vision, and values. Aligning these three (MVV) elements of an organization’s culture starts at the top, Stephen explained. Living the mission, vision, and values starts at the top. If the CEO isn’t walking the talk, the whole organization knows it.

For example, he explained, “My son and daughter keep me honest. When they were in preschool, there was a time when they wouldn’t eat their vegetables, so we made them a deal. The deal was that if Johnny and Sophia ate everything on their plates, Deborah and I would play a game with them after supper. This strategy was pretty effective.

“They immediately started finishing their supper. After supper, they carried their plates to the sink, and helped clean up the kitchen. Then I headed to my study to prepare for class the next day.

“As it turned out, I did not dive into my work as planned. Because Johnny ran right into my study, grabbed one of my hands, and started pulling me away from the computer saying, ‘Daddy, you said we could play a game! You said...’”

“The trouble with children,” the professor of religion and ethics explained, “is that they keep you honest. They are quick to point out when the CEO is not walking the talk.”

Children are the quintessential “integrity police.” They have an amazing ability to detect when the words and deeds of people who they look up to are out of whack.

II

Jesus was a bit like Johnny, Stephen and Deborah’s son. He had a strong sense of justice and integrity, and he challenged people whose words and deeds were not aligned. In particular, Jesus challenged the scribes and Pharisees, the doctors of religious law and education, who knew and taught Torah but who did not live by Torah. In fact, the scribes and Pharisees seemed to live their lives in contradiction with the Law and the Prophets.

By Matthew’s account, Jesus described them as sitting on their laurels and binding the weak with heavy burdens that they would not remove. These religious muck-a-mucks did their good deeds in the public eye, in order to be seen by others. They made their phylacteries broad and their fringes long.

(Phylacteries are worn by Orthodox Jews during Morning Prayer as a physical reminder of the Law. Phylacteries, also called “tefillin,” are the small black leather boxes that are tied to the forehead and left arm and hold pieces of parchment with verses from Torah.

The reference to long fringes pertains to the prayer shawls worn by observant Jews when saying their prayers in the Synagogue. The long fringes were intended as a reminder of the Commandments.)

So by making the comments that he did about the scribes and Pharisees’ phylacteries and fringes, Jesus argued that the religious authorities kept the ceremonial practices associated with Orthodox Judaism, but they did not live integrated lives. They did not integrate the teachings of Torah into the way that they lived their lives, particularly the way that they related to the most vulnerable people in their society.

Continuing on, Jesus observed that the scribes and Pharisees loved to sit in places of honor at feasts and take the best seats in the house at the synagogue, and they paraded around the marketplace just to be noticed and to hear themselves introduced. So, bottom line, Jesus said, “Don’t be like them.” Then he concluded with this warning:

“...[for] all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted” (Mt. 23:12).

Don't be like the scribes and the Pharisees: don't rest on ceremony. Don't be a hypocrite. Instead, humble yourself, and practice what you preach. Better yet, practice what Jesus' preached.

III

Practice what you preach. Practice what Jesus' preached. We want to live lives of integrity. We want to integrate Jesus' mission, vision, and values into our daily life practices, but how?

Like everything else in life, integrity is a learned behavior. It starts with how we are raised to behave, and then becomes a matter of intentionality and practice on our parts as adults.

To borrow from the Patterson family example, every parent knows that if Stephen wanted Johnny to learn to clean his plate—and more importantly to keep his word—that his father had to clean his plate and keep his word. Children learn what they live.

Children also learn from the stories we teach them. This is why participating in worship and Church School is so important for our youth. Through these experiences, we teach the stories of our faith and the concepts on which they are founded, and we reinforce the faith values that our young people are learning at home. Because the faith values that Jesus preached and practiced were and are profoundly counter-culture, parents are not usually able to teach these faith values alone. They—we all—need the support of extended family and our congregation as a whole to discern, reinforce, and exemplify our faith values.

In addition to teaching and learning the stories, concepts, and values of our faith as children, a further way that we can grow in Christian integrity, Jesus says in Matthew 23, is by how we identify ourselves, and how we use the power that we have to carry on Christ's mission, vision, and values.

For example, even if we identify as rabbis, which means “teachers,” we must remember that to be effective teachers, we must identify first and foremost as learners. One of the principals who I have admired most in my life has a sign on his door that says “Head Learner.”

In addition to teachers being learners, we are encouraged to remember that even when we become parents, we are still someone else's children. Most especially, we are children of God.

And, even if we become rich and powerful by worldly standards, the Christian life is fundamentally an identity and a calling to be with and serve others, particularly those whom the world would classify as “beneath” us.

IV

The ways that we continue to learn, embrace our identity as children of God, and serve and be with others will vary depending on our own unique vocations, but the strategy that Jesus proposed is the same for all of us. The strategy Jesus promoted was and is to move out of our “comfort zones,” and into the seat of those whom society (or even we ourselves) may see as beneath us.

Consider for a moment: who by worldly standards may be considered “beneath” you/me/us? Who is in that humble position that Jesus told his followers to go and be with—not for their sakes, but ironically—for our own sake?

Think about occasions in your life when you accepted a Christ-like challenge to go and be with a person or group of people who were of a more humble stature than your own. Or, think of when you might have been part of a group whom others thought was more humble. (We’ve all have experiences like this. If we didn’t, we wouldn’t be here.)

When you think about that occasion or the person or group, and those experiences, ask what you learned about yourself through those relationships and that setting.

If your experiences are anything like mine, then I suspect that many of those experiences have been eye-opening and humbling for you. I suspect that you and I learned about the dreadful reality of stereotypes and how prejudice is fostered by a combination of misinformation and separation about individuals and groups who seem to be different from me/us or who we want to see as different. Perhaps we even turned those stereotypes inward and they influenced how we have seen ourselves.

This phenomenon that I am describing is what social scientists and theologians often refer to as “otherizing.” (To otherize is to “make into the ‘other’; to separate from the ‘our’; to make a distinction.”)¹

All kinds of interesting arguments have been made as to why human beings have a tendency to otherize. But what intrigues me more than these explanations are the antidotes to otherizing, which Jesus promoted.

Jesus’ antidote to otherizing was to go and be with the “other,” to move outside of our comfort zones, to push ourselves to explore those from whom we prefer to distance ourselves, and to learn from them about ourselves—not for their sakes, but for our own sake. One of the things that we often learn through experiences like these is how much we actually have in common with people or groups whom we think of as “the other.”

¹ <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=otherize>

Interestingly, social scientists and psychologists have often been critical of religions—particularly because of the profound capacity that religions have had to promote otherizing in our world. But Thom Moon, a San Francisco-based scholar, practitioner, and author, writes in his white paper about otherizing that spiritual formation and spiritual practices can also be a helpful antidote to otherizing.

Here he references Buddha and a Native American elder, both of whose teachings are, (in my view) in line with Jesus' teaching in today's gospel reading about how to faithfully embrace the other and become more whole and holy people.

In his paper on otherizing, Moon offers advice about some ways that people can unlearn the negative personal and social practice of otherizing. Here he says:

We can also derive benefit by doing spiritual practices, such as Buddhist loving-kindness meditation, which are designed to strengthen the capacities for compassion and forgiveness. It is ironic that so many of us cling so tenaciously to our habit of otherizing, because the more we strengthen these positive capacities, the happier we tend to be. That's because all of the emotions connected with otherizing – contempt, hatred, vengefulness, fear, etc. – are painful, while those connected with empathy and compassion are soothing, peaceful, and even joyful.

In his book *Buddha's Brain*, neuropsychologist Rick Hanson tells the story of "...a Native American elder who was asked how she had become so wise, so happy, and so respected. She answered: 'In my heart there are two wolves: a wolf of love and a wolf of hate. It all depends on which one I feed each day.'²

For Jesus the antidote to otherizing is to pray for "others," and to be with "others." For Buddha, the antidote is to practice loving-kindness meditation. And for the Native American elder, the antidote is to feed the wolf of love. However you describe the spiritual practice, the purpose of these practices and the behavior that flows from such practices is the same: we learn about ourselves and what we have in common with "others," so that our hearts are opened. Our spirits grow wiser. And our values are forged into practices that don't just sound good—but that are good, for us and for every living thing. Thanks be to God. Amen.

² http://www.tommoon.net/articles/why_otherize.html