

“The Beginning of ‘Do as I Say’ and not ‘Do as I Do’ ”

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church
for Sunday, November 5, 2017 at 10:30 a.m.

Communion Sunday and Stewardship Celebration Sunday
Also Remembrance Day Sunday Observance

Scripture Readings: Joshua 3:7-17 and Matthew 23:1-12
(Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

There is a common way that we may dismiss someone. When we hear their advice, positions, understandings, and we see how they live their lives, we may find that there is a dis-connect. Some people hold strong views about equality, justice, economic fairness, but they may not live their lives in such a way that they emulate those attributes.

History is rife with leaders who speak about accountability for the citizens of their particular nation, but who may be skilled at avoiding taxes for themselves or laundering money in off-shore accounts. Rare is the person who boldly and proudly proclaims: “I love paying my tax commitment to the government – that is why I have entered politics.”

In today’s reading, Jesus calls the religious leaders of his day to a new accountability. It is not good enough to say the right things or have the proper perspective on the scriptural imperatives. One also must live those truths in ways that are visible, clear, and inspiring.

Now words are important to us. We, in fact, use the word “word” to describe what is important to us. Theology literally means “the word about God,” and biology is “the word about life” and geology is “the word about the earth.” Words define us in so many ways. The Gospel of John speaks about the power of the “Word” – “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

Then there was a time that we measured the religious life as working hard to keep the peace. In fact, any sign of division, controversy, and disagreement was viewed as beyond the religious way.

But Jesus never took that position. He was more interested in calling people to justice, to demanding the right attitude for the benefit of the people often ignored and stepped upon in society. Keeping the peace does one thing – it keeps the status quo, and if there are people disadvantaged by the power structures and organization of the community as it now sits, then that disadvantage is only perpetrated by silence.

Any change as dramatic as Jesus suggested takes time – years, decades, centuries – to implement. In Canada we heard this week that two independent aboriginal senators have questioned the government’s commitment to changing, even scrapping the Indian Act. They have been appointed by the current Prime Minister – and he sought more independent thinking by the people in the Senate. But now people are actually using their independent thinking and perspectives to offer different ideas, and the shock is felt immediately.

If we ask for God to impact our lives, then expect things will change.

In the 1960's and 1970's, students at post-secondary levels of our educational system were being placed on academic committees, review commissions, and discipline hearings, but it took some time for those hearings and reviews to have true input from the students. In the early days the students were expected to simply react as everyone else had reacted in the past, but suddenly these students offered a different perspective and expressed independent ideas, and the rules of the past were thrown out.

I served on a school board that introduced a student-board committee for high school students in 1973, long before such committees were mandated by the province or even discussed in any other school board in Ontario. But 20 years later, after I attended a subsequent committee and interviewed the chair of the committee, I learned reality had changed. The chair of the committee was a student in grade 11, and the committee had great bench strength thanks to the various students from the different high schools who were on the committee. If a student-board committee is to exist, then expect some changes. Students do not think exactly like their parents or teachers – nor should they.

Jesus never shied away from offering a change of action, a change of perspective, even a change of structure and organization.

In the United States Sundays have been synonymous with NFL football for many years. While football remains popular with many people, the fabric of fan support has been rent by ongoing protests during the national anthem before these games. Inspired by Black Lives Matter, some football players have taken a knee during the singing of the national anthem to protest police shootings of young black men, thus eliciting complaints and denunciations from some owners, individuals, fans, and even the President.

David Brown, the former police chief in Dallas, Texas, himself a black man, was asked in June if Black Lives Matter has been a helpful or a harmful force in the United States. His answer offers a reflective perspective on the issue of change and improvement in society as a whole. Brown responded: “In this country change never occurs when you protest and that is the only thing that you do.” He went on to speak about the need for people to be involved in the municipal governmental process where policing is controlled. Without involvement in the bodies that oversee the concerns and issues at the forefront of the society, nothing will change.

If we want things to be done in a new and different way, then we had better be ready to be involved, and then deal with the changes.

Leonard Sweet is a popular preacher and theological school principal who is in great demand throughout North America. In his book *Post-Modern Pilgrims* he writes about the interesting side effect of the move to more and more individualism in society. As we become beholden to technology, and we hear that we use cells phones on average an hour more than we did just a few years ago, it also is true that “the pursuit of individualism has led us to this place of hunger for connectedness, for communities not of blood or nation but of connectedness...” (Leonard Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims*, Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2000, p.p. 109-110).

Words do not capture the whole truth – we need to feel connected, we need to see examples of what is expected of us.

This past week the south Sudbury ministerial gathered for lunch and discussion, focusing in our reflective time on the ways that we as worship and pastoral leaders were taught prayer. The stories were varied and inspiring, and I could not match the depth and intensity of the stories of some of my colleagues. I learned about the importance of prayer in saying evening prayers at bedtime, and sharing a blessing at meal time with my parents, but I did not have powerful, strong mentors to which I could turn who taught me about prayer or offered important biblical truths that informed the words that I uttered when addressing God.

But I could say, consistent with today's reading I now realize, that I had someone who taught me the proper attitude for prayer. Mr. Dewhirst sat in the same pew our family often ended up in, as we sat near the front. (Usually there is no fighting for a seat when one sits at the front.) Mr. and Mrs. Dewhirst were the oldest people in the congregation – probably in their early or mid-seventies in a congregation filled with young families and many children. But Mr. Dewhirst always paid attention to those around him, offered encouragement to the children of the church like myself, and displayed an attitude of reverence not just for God, but for those with whom he shared worship. It was not his words, which were few, but his being that left me and others feeling I was in the presence of a holy man.

Thich Nhat Hanh, the Buddhist monk from Vietnam, recently celebrated his 91st birthday, with no end in sight for his teaching/sharing/speaking schedule. When he set up his own publishing company earlier in this century, he decided that he needed to do something different in the way that he printed his books. If he was to encourage people to find space and quiet in their lives, and not be so cluttered by words, activities, even stuff, then he must print his books in new ways. Suddenly he used fewer words in total, and printed fewer words on each page, while he inserted more pictures and images into his books to show people we can let words get in the way of being silent and present before God, and with one another.

In tune with today's reading, Hanh elsewhere wrote: "Our own life has to be our message."
*(from **The World We Have: A Buddhist Approach to Peace and Ecology**)*

Jesus invites us not to spend all of our time preaching to others as to what they should do, but to be living examples of the faith in our own personal, quiet, consistent ways.

Do as I say, along with do as I do, inspire more easily and more readily for sure.