

## Spirit of Service

I think it must be human nature to occasionally look back in one's life, no matter how long that journey has been, and say to oneself, "Gee, I wish I'd taken advantage of that opportunity!" I don't have a whole lot of those regrets in my life, but one mild regret is that I didn't get involved in journalism in high school. Kirkwood Senior High had an award-winning journalism program. Both our yearbook, *The Pioneer*, and our weekly newspaper, *The Call*, routinely won awards in the state and nationally. The journalism teacher and sponsor for both publications, Homer Hall, was revered by students. I had many friends involved in his projects, including my still-friend Katy Veazey, now Katherine Wagner, and her then-boyfriend, Thomas Reese, whose work as a photojournalist was nominated for the Pulitzer when he was on staff at the Seattle Times.

Maybe that's why, in the last couple of years of my college career, that I got sucked into the world of *The Rice Thresher*, my university's weekly paper. Again, I had a lot of friends on the *Thresher* staff. One of my best college buddies, a member of the Rice Players like myself, was John Heaner, who was Fine Arts Editor for the *Thresher* when he was a senior. It was John who gave me my first assignments to write reviews of the small professional theatres in Houston – he kept the beat at the number one professional company, the Alley, for himself. So I reviewed shows at Main Street Theatre (where I later worked), Chocolate Bayou Theatre, and Stages, as well as college theatre productions I wasn't involved in for a year and then, when John left, took over the *Thresher* coverage for the Alley as well. *The Thresher's* editor in chief that last year was Jeanne Cooper, who is also still a good friend. Now winding down her journalism career, Jeanne is a travel writer, based on the Big Island of Hawai'i, and an active lay leader in her church on the island. Oh, and there's another journalism student still prominent in my life. Some of you may not know that Connie Eddens left the prestigious J-School at University of Missouri to marry me. I hope she doesn't regret that TOO much.

One of the informal lessons I learned in rubbing shoulders with all those journalistic types is one of the well-known sayings of the profession: Don't bury the lede! Have you heard that expression? What it means for the writers of newspaper and magazine articles, and now, I guess for blogs, too, is that you should be sure that the most important point of your article is mentioned in the very first paragraph. If, for example, you are covering a political campaign, you don't wait until the end of the story to mention that the candidate is proposing an 18% raise in taxes.

So, what's all this got to do with Matthew 23? Well, I'm accusing the sinless Jesus this morning of the ultimate journalistic sin: he's buried the lede. While I will spend some time in this sermon exploring verses 1-10 of the chapter, the real point of this passage is in verses 11 & 12: "The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted." That theme is key to Jesus' ministry and we read of it in the Gospels from the time of the angel's annunciation to Mary all the way through her son's death on the cross. Paul picks up the theme in one of my favorite passages in the New Testament. I've got a lot to say about humility and exaltation this morning, but there are also those ten other verses to deal with. So, now you know the lede of the story, let's process the bulk of it.

As I surveyed recent articles on this passage online this past week, I was reminded that this passage, sadly, has been used by some as a basis for attack on Jews in general and rabbis in particular. I am perpetually saddened by how many "Good Christian People" over the centuries

have used their misinterpretations of Jesus' words as license to hate whoever they want to. This is, after all, the man who taught that we should love our neighbors and even our enemies. Ah, well... Some scholars have sought to escape that trap by saying that verses 1-7 are not the words of Jesus at all but rather the insertion of the author of The Gospel According to Matthew that reflects the hostility that had grown up between the synagogues and the Church by the end of the first century of the Common Era. It's not an unreasonable theory but I do think it's an unnecessary one. As I read this passage, it's clear to me that Jesus is referring to a particular situation and particular religious leaders. Jesus and his audience may well be able to look across the road or the plaza and see those scribes and Pharisees with their broad phylacteries and long fringes. Jesus insists that his hearers take the teachings of those men to heart – adherence to the Law of God is important to Jesus. What he warns against is mimicking the actions of those bad leaders and that's not a blanket condemnation of all the religious leaders in Judaea, just those he's pointing out.

And, let's face it, all human institutions are plagued with bad leaders to a greater or lesser extent. For those who want to point fingers at rabbis, there are, I suspect, an equal percentage of bad Christian leaders. Bad leadership in the religious world, just as in the business or political worlds, doesn't have to mean egregious behavior, shepherds who prey on the sheep. It can be as mundane as setting expectations for the flock that one doesn't follow oneself, just as Jesus mentions. In the business world, it may look like a manager who tells his or her staff that they are expected to stay until the job is done, then takes a long lunch break and sneaks out at half an hour before the expected quitting time. That sort of unfair, demoralizing behavior is equivalent to the rabbis who "tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them."

And then there are the leaders who go off track for the sake of their own egos. They are the ones like the scribes and Pharisees that Jesus described, who "do all their deeds to be seen by others... They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces..." We've witnessed in the last four years on the national scene how devastating it can be to have a leader who is always and only "all about himself." But, of course, you don't have to be the President or have an ego the size of Manhattan to be prone to wanting to have your ego stroked. I think it's a common weakness in most of us.

I was sixteen when I first began to think seriously that God might be calling me to life in the ministry. At Kirkwood Baptist Church, we had an active youth group that included a large youth choir, some small singing ensembles, and, of course, a drama troupe. Our youth choir toured to nearby states every summer but during the spring of 1977, our youth minister, Tim Cleary, decided to put together a week-long mission trip to Iowa for just a few of us. There was one of those small musical ensembles, the drama troupe, and a few others. We were to sing and perform in churches and schools and lead Bible studies for the local youth and children during that week. I've got lots of stories from that trip but what is on my mind this morning happened at the end of the week, following a Bible study that I'd led. One of the young men at our host church pulled me aside after the study. "You know," he said, "you're really good at this. I think God is calling you into the ministry."

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It was a simple word of affirmation from a near-stranger, but it echoed within me for the next several days. Was God calling me into the ministry? Or was I making too much of a chance remark? I prayed about it – a lot! I remember standing in the shower at home the following Sunday morning and praying – I do some of my best praying in the shower in the morning, don't you? – “God, please don't let me fool myself. If this is just my ego talking, stop me!” But the thought and that guy's words continued to dominate my thoughts and so, that Sunday night when the traveling group were to report on our experiences to the church, I announced that I was, in good Baptist vernacular, surrendering to the ministry and would prepare myself for seminary after college.

As you all know, my journey was far more complicated than 16-year old me predicted. But the call was valid and so was my concern about being ego-driven. I stayed away from pulpit ministry, except for a couple of short-term interims, until I was 44, 28 years after that calling experience. Part of that was that God blessed me with a beautiful career in the theatre, but part of it was due to my own suspicion of myself and my ego. I didn't want to be a pastor just because it meant people would look up to me and I would be a big shot. I didn't trust myself not to make it all about me.

I was raised from an early age not to “toot my own horn” and I was part of some church families early in life that taught by their actions that preachers weren't to be too full of themselves. At Skycrest Baptist, the church of my earliest memories, and at New Bethel General Baptist and Herculaneum Baptist, where I visited as a boy with my grandparents, and at North Shore Baptist, where I was baptized, the ministerial leaders were never referred to as “Reverend” or “Pastor” but as “Brother.” Brother Houston, Brother Sullivan, Brother Miller, or even, in Arkansas, Brother Robert. At Kirkwood, which was actually pretty high church for Southern Baptists, I don't remember hearing the pastor called Doctor Carter, although he was entitled to that honorific. He was just Homer, to young and old. That egalitarian approach helped those pastors stay real about who and what they were. In our Baptist tradition, where we uphold the concept of the priesthood of all believers, it reminded them and the congregations they served that they were chosen for a servant leadership.

I remember vividly the day that Connie and the kids and I drove into Lynnwood after moving from Evansville and came by the church for me to sign our ministerial covenant. As we pulled into the driveway, we saw the old wooden sign saying, “Good Shepherd Church,” with service times below it and, below those, a new addition that said, “M. Christopher Boyer, Pastor.” I thought at the time, and still think, that it was one of the nicest greetings I'd ever received. But it also troubled me a little. I didn't want, and still don't want, to be the focus of what happens here. You all called me to be your paid leader, but I am only one of the leaders at Good Shepherd. Nearly every person on this Zoom call this morning has, at one time or another, led as a deacon, a committee member, a musician, a teacher, a reader, or in some other way. We are all leaders, all priests to one another, disclosing the presence of Jesus to each other through our service to one another. Connie and I chose from that first week among you to sit with our kids where we still do – a couple of rows back from the front. It was where we were most comfortable and I liked the intentional symbolism of your pastor arising from the midst of you, standing in prominence while I perform my pastoral work, and then returning to a place among you. If nothing else, it reminds me of who and what I am – just another follower of Jesus, doing my best

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to answer the calling with which you have blessed me. I've not always fulfilled that vision, but I have always done the best I could at the time.

Remember our “lede” from Matthew? “The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.” Say what you want about the origin of the rest of this passage and its criticism of scribes, Pharisees, and rabbis, but those words certainly sound like Jesus. Even before The Gospel According to Matthew was written, Paul wrote a letter to the Christians in Philippi and in it he quoted a hymn that was already popular among Christians: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,” he wrote, then, quoting the hymn, “who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” The greatest human ever served his friends, knelt at their feet. Jesus humbled himself and he was exalted.

Look, you don't have to be the Messiah or even a pastor to be tempted by strokes to your ego. But, as Brian McLaren writes, “the Spirit leads us downward. To the bottom, to the place of humility, to the position and posture of service... that's where the Spirit, like water, flows... God comes down. God meets us where we are, in our neighborhood, on our level, where we need God most. God descends to the pit of need, suffering, and abandonment. God is not distant from us, aloof, across a chasm, far above looking down. No, God is with us. Here. Now. In reach.”

And so, my sisters and my brothers, we are called by God to imitate God and to let the Spirit lead us downward as well. We are called by God to comfort those who mourn, to feed those who are hungry, to stand with the poor and the powerless. Whether it is taking the side of someone who is being bullied at school or at work, or marching in the streets for equal rights for all, or writing to those in power to call for their action on behalf of justice, the Spirit leads us downward and empowers us to act on behalf of those at the bottom, serving them, kneeling at their feet. That's how Mary saw God working in her life. That's how her little boy acted when he grew up and became a man. That's how we follow Jesus: humbly serving those in need of our help, truly loving our neighbors and our enemies, shining Jesus' light of hope and love and peace wherever we go. We are called to humble service and we are empowered by the God of Vision. Thanks be to God! Amen.