

Sermon – “Show Me”

Sunday, October 18, 2020

Scripture Readings: Exodus 33:12-23; Matthew 22:15-22

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Our first reading of scripture comes from the book of Exodus. At this point in the story of the Israelites' travel from slavery in Egypt to the promised land, there is some crisis of confidence within Moses and broken relationship between the people and God, after their worship of a golden calf has brought God's anger on them. Hear these words from Exodus 33, verses 12 through 23.

¹² Moses said to the LORD, “See, you have said to me, ‘Bring up this people’; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, ‘I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.’ ¹³ Now if I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.” ¹⁴ He said, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” ¹⁵ And he said to him, “If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. ¹⁶ For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth.”

¹⁷ The LORD said to Moses, “I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.” ¹⁸ Moses said, “Show me your glory, I pray.” ¹⁹ And he said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, ‘The LORD; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. ²⁰ But,” he said, “you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.” ²¹ And the LORD continued, “See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; ²² and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; ²³ then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.”

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In our Gospel reading, which comes from Matthew chapter 22, verses 15 through 22, we hear Jesus in the midst of many teachings after having come to Jerusalem near the end of his earthly ministry. He has been received by many, and others have decided he is an enemy. Listen for God's Word.

¹⁵ Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. ¹⁶ So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. ¹⁷ Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?”

¹⁸ But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹ Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰ Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” ²¹ They answered, “The emperor's.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.”

²² When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

When I was in seminary, if a group of my classmates would go out to eat at a restaurant somewhere, one friend of mine was always particularly insistent that we make sure to tip well. The reason for this insistence was that she had another friend who was a waitress, who had confided to her once a disturbing fact: in her experience, any time a group showed up to a restaurant and visibly prayed before eating, it was a pretty reliable indicator that they would leave a puny tip. This horrified my friend, as it did me. Apparently if anyone in a food service job did not particularly know Jesus, one thing they would know about him was that his was not a spirit of generosity, but of stinginess.

We are not missionaries only when we travel across the sea to a faraway land.

We sometimes forget we are missionaries at all. It is easier that way, certainly. It is easier to imagine that mission is something done only by special people, called apart from the rest of us, and perhaps we can just support them with a financial gift rather than having that work to do ourselves. Or at least, we might hope, it only falls on us when we sign up for some official missional activity sponsored by our church—whether that be in another country, another state, or the next house over, we can do our mission and then clock out and go home.

But apparently that is not so; apparently we are spreading something about the Gospel, for good or for ill, just by sitting down to eat in a restaurant. Maybe we think we can hide from it by not getting noticed praying, but that’s an ineffective evasion. Our neighbors know we are church people. Our friends do. Our coworkers do. Our families do. Our children see every bit of how we live our lives while claiming to be followers of Jesus Christ.

One of the really interesting things about the early church was how the Gospel spread in those days. People may have heard a convincing message, sure. But what established Christian faith in ancient culture was that Christians were odd. They stood out because they lived differently, in a radical and thorough way. When people welcome the outcasts without fear it goes against the grain. When people care for the hungry and the needy without concern for their own well-being, it causes those around them to take notice. When people live as though their own safety, money, and possessions are not important at all by comparison with living a generous life, people wonder what could possibly be so valuable that it outweighs nearly everything they’ve been taught by the world to care most about. When people’s beliefs put them at odds with the dominant strains of culture and even under physical threat, and their beliefs hold firm anyway, it sparks confusion, and curiosity. And when those firmly lived beliefs insist on blessing others, sharing kindness, and showing compassion, without hesitation and without regard for the cost to themselves, such beliefs prove compelling, and irresistible, and they catch fire and spread.

The world has been told a lot of things, but what it really cries out is “Show me.” Show me what you are about. Show me how what you believe matters. Show me that it is real. If I can tell you with the most eloquent of words the truths I know—“If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love,” the Apostle Paul wrote, “I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.”¹

¹ 1 Corinthians 13:1 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

This did not stop Paul from using words, and a great many of them. But the reason people were interested in hearing those words, the reason they thought there was something meaningful in them worth listening to, was because Paul did not just speak them; he lived them. He gave up his high rank in the local culture. He served among the people and traveled, enduring indignities and persecutions. Here was a man who, when unjustly beaten and jailed for disrupting the income of people using a slave girl for profit, refused to escape his imprisonment when given an unexpected chance, out of concern for the guard who would suffer punishment.² This is not an ordinary way of thinking, or acting, and it provokes reaction. Show me this, and I will listen to everything you say.

Jesus uses that very phrase, “Show me,” in the second reading we heard today.³ Jesus himself has been showing people something, something at odds with what the powerful people of the world wanted to hear: “good news to the poor,” “release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind,” “the oppressed go[ing] free,” and “the Lord’s favor.”⁴ And Jesus has been noticed, because he does not just say these words; he walks and talks and visits among the powerless and cast out; he heals; he shows compassion, he lifts up the downtrodden and demonstrates as much care for them as for the rich and influential. He walks *and* talks a world flipped upside-down: those who place themselves first will be last, and those left in last position will be first.⁵

And so there are those who come to him, having seen what he is showing the world and having become alarmed at it, and they seek to trip him up and knock him down. Burying their attempt to trap him in saccharine flattery, they appear before him with what they expect will be a difficult question to answer publicly for someone in his position as a Jewish teacher, whose loyalty ought to be only to God and Jewish law but who could get in big trouble for expressing dissent from Roman law:

“Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” They answered, “The emperor’s.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”⁶

“Show me the coin,” he demands. They do, and he follows with his own question: “Whose head is this, and whose title?”—or literally, “Whose image and inscription is this?” The image is that of Caesar, the emperor, and we are told, then, to give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s. But although that theoretically is enough to answer the question asked, Jesus does not stop there, does he? “...[A]nd to God the things that are God’s,” he finishes.

His interrogators leave without asking the obvious follow-up question: “And what are the things that are God’s?” Perhaps they depart quickly because they aren’t sure they want to hear that answered. Maybe we’d rather run away, too. For if the coin belongs to the emperor because it bears his image, then what belongs to God? What bears the image of God?

² See Acts 16:16-34.

³ From Matthew 22:19.

⁴ See Luke 4:16-30 (*NRSV*), in which Jesus is quoting from Isaiah 61.

⁵ See Matthew 19:29-20:16, Mark 10:17-31, and Luke 13:22-30.

⁶ Matthew 22:17-21 (*NRSV*).

Those of you in our weekly Bible studies know, as the Pharisees surely did also, precisely where this takes us: right to the very beginning—Genesis chapter 1, the Creation story.

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.⁷

Coins are easy, by comparison. Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s. We ourselves are the image-bearers of God. Give to God the things that are God’s, indeed. Following Christ is no small endeavor, no minor thing like slapping a label on ourselves—“Christian”—and leaving it at that, as if being a follower of Christ is primarily a matter of where to put oneself in a religious file drawer. If we are Christian, it should *show*.

What do the people in our world, in our nation, in our culture see, when they see the name Jesus? Do they see something outlandish, someone whose followers are inspired to be mind-bogglingly compassionate and generous, inviting others in, praying even for their enemies, loving those around them with such genuine and dramatic, unreserved genuineness that it is immediately apparent when you’ve come across a Christian? Or does the world see something that makes no difference; someone whose followers are just like everyone else around them but happen to wear cross jewelry occasionally and have a peculiar habit of not sleeping in on Sundays? Or worse, do they see something that subtracts from the world; someone whose followers are stingy, or angry, nasty and rude, selfish and hypocritical?

If there is too little of the first thing going on— “know[ing] we are Christians by our love,”⁸ and too much of the other two—being lukewarm nothings indistinguishable from the world, or being known for how badly we tip the waitstaff, then it isn’t enough for us to lament this. It is ours to fix this. We are not missionaries only when we travel across the sea to a faraway land. We are sent into the world with the Gospel of Christ in our hearts, and it is not meant to be trapped there, hidden away and of no consequence. It is meant to transform us and make us do everything altogether differently. We are supposed to be aliens in our own land, truer residents of another kingdom altogether, with a completely different understanding of what matters and why, and who.

This isn’t always easy, certainly, and certainly not comfortable. Being called and sent by God isn’t something anybody knows how to understand entirely. And I mean anybody. Recall the first of our readings today. Moses stood before the Lord confused and uncertain. “Show me your ways,” he asks God. He knows he is called to something, and yet he cannot see the path ahead, nor does he feel confidence about God’s presence; he needs reassurance. This is *Moses* we are talking about, remember, the leader of the entire people of Israel, who met God at the burning bush, who faced down Pharaoh, who led the people out of slavery in Egypt, and yet he has the same need we all do in our struggles with how to lead faithful lives. “Show me your

⁷ Genesis 1:26-27 (*Revised Standard Version*).

⁸ Here remembering the well-known hymn “They’ll Know We Are Christians” (also known as “We Are One in the Spirit”), by Peter Scholtes, a Roman Catholic priest, inspired by John 13:35.

ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight,”⁹ he pleads with God. What is my mission, and how will I know you are with me in it? He cries out for the presence of the Lord to be clearly with him and with the people he leads. “Show me your glory,”¹⁰ he prays.

And God’s answer to Moses is both yes and no.

“I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, ‘The LORD; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But,” he said, “you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.” And the LORD continued, “See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.”¹¹

If even Moses was not able to see the fullness of things, we should not be surprised that we often find ourselves, too, inspired by glimpses of truth and glory and yet not ever able to see all that we want to be able to see. But Moses is not left alone. His prayers are not left unanswered. He is protected from what he is not prepared or able to see, but he is shown what he can see, and he is given a promise. “My presence will go with you,” the Lord tells him, “and I will give you rest.”¹²

We have the promise, too. Jesus gave the Great Commission, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you”—and he followed it immediately with this: “And remember,” he declared, “I am with you always, to the end of the age.”¹³

In God let us trust, and in this world let us live as though we do. May the Holy Spirit help us. Amen.

⁹ From Exodus 33:13 (*NRSV*).

¹⁰ From Exodus 33:18 (*NRSV*).

¹¹ From Exodus 33:19-23 (*NRSV*).

¹² From Exodus 33:14 (*NRSV*).

¹³ Matthew 28:19-20 (*NRSV*).