

Alive: Spirit of Service

Matthew 23:1-12

Jeff Marian

I have a sneaking suspicion that if Jesus were to show up as a guest preacher in our churches today, he wouldn't be well-received by many because so much of what Jesus teaches is counter cultural. It bumps up against our cultural assumptions. And that was every bit as true when Jesus was teaching and preaching in the first century. Today's Scripture reading is a prime example. It's from Matthew 23. Let's read it together:

*Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples,
2 "The teachers of religious law and the Pharisees are the official interpreters of the law of Moses. 3 So practice and obey whatever they tell you, but don't follow their example. For they don't practice what they teach. 4 They crush people with unbearable religious demands and never lift a finger to ease the burden.*

5 "Everything they do is for show. On their arms they wear extra wide prayer boxes with Scripture verses inside, and they wear robes with extra-long tassels.

6 And they love to sit at the head table at banquets and in the seats of honor in the synagogues. 7 They love to receive respectful greetings as they walk in the marketplaces, and to be called 'Rabbi.'

8 "Don't let anyone call you 'Rabbi,' for you have only one teacher, and all of you are equal as brothers and sisters. 9 And don't address anyone here on earth as 'Father,' for only God in heaven is your Father. 10 And don't let anyone call you 'Teacher,' for you have only one teacher, the Messiah. 11 The greatest among you must be a servant. 12 But those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

This is the Word of God for the people of God.
Thanks be to God.

To use biblical language...we may one day follow Jesus upward into heaven, but if we're going to follow Jesus in this life the Spirit will lead us downward to humility and service.

That may come as a surprise to people who are raised in a culture that is obsessed with upward mobility. We climb social ladders. We rise to a higher standard of living. We reach for a higher position. We want to be on top. But the Spirit leads us downward. To the bottom, to the place of humility, to the position and posture of humble service.

And Jesus didn't just teach this; he modeled it for his followers. Before Jesus, and even after him, most people assumed that God was a great distance above us, but Jesus modeled a very different vision. In Jesus, God comes down. God meets us where we are, on our level, where we need God most. And Jesus didn't come to be served, but to serve. He shocked everyone by taking on the role of a servant and washing the disciples' feet. While we fight and scratch to climb into the inner circle, Jesus chooses to walk with the outsider and the outcast. While we strive to fill ourselves up, Jesus chooses to pour himself out.

St. Paul put it this way in his letter to the Philippians:
Though he was God,

he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to.

Instead, he gave up his divine privileges he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being.

When he appeared in human form,

he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross.

If the fullness of God is embodied in Jesus, then the God we worship, the God we love with our whole heart, mind, soul and strength, is a God who models a life of humble service.

If you listen to the Spirit, here's what will happen to you. You'll be at a social gathering, and you'll notice that on one side of the room all the beautiful people will have gathered and are laughing and having fun together. And in a far corner you'll notice a person who is alone, feeling awkward, not knowing anyone. The Spirit will draw you to the person in need. The Spirit may use you to be the bridge between outsiders and insiders, and in that connection both will be better off.

If you listen to the Spirit, here's what will happen to you. You'll realize that someone is angry at you or resentful toward you. You'll hear that someone is spreading false information about you or working

behind your back to do you harm. With every fiber of your being you'll want to write them off, or even get back at them. But the Spirit will draw you toward them in humility and seek to reconcile, to close the gap. And even if that person is too angry or insecure to respond well, know that the Spirit is at work in and through you.

If you listen to the Spirit, here's what will happen to you. You'll make a mistake and be tempted to cover it up, to minimize it or make excuses for it. But the Spirit will draw you to admit it, first to yourself and to God, and then to those who deserve to know. And if that mistake has wounded or offended another person, you'll humbly ask for forgiveness.

If you listen to the Spirit, here's what will happen to you. It will be late and you'll be tired. There will be dishes to do or clothes to pick up or trash to empty. "Someone else should have done this," you'll think to yourself. And you'll rehearse in your mind the speech that you'll give them. And then you'll think to yourself, "But maybe they're just as tired or overworked as I am. So maybe I can help." You won't do it as a manipulative act, but as a simple act of service, as a way of following Jesus.

If we listen to the Spirit, the Spirit will lead us into a life of humble service. And if we practice dwelling in the Spirit we'll find that the inner resistance to this way of life that we all experience will slowly loosen its hold on us.

And one more thing. There will be times in your life when you will need to be served, not to be the one serving. But even then, you will have the opportunity to appreciate, bless and thank those who serve you, and in so doing, you and they will experience mutual service...one of life's greatest joys.

The culture around us will constantly tempt us to move on up. But the Spirit of God leads us downward. Downward in humility. Downward in service. And when that little voice inside your head tempts you to strive to climb over others, the Spirit will lead you to wash their feet. You won't find God at the top of the ladder. You'll find God by following the Spirit's call to descend. It happened to Jesus. It will happen to you, too, if you follow the Spirit's lead.

And if you're hearing that call of the Spirit, but you aren't sure where or how you're being called to service, let a volunteer at the Connect Desk show you the many avenues of service you can travel in and through Prince of Peace.

"Movin' on up" was a great move for the Jeffersons, and movin' on down in humble service is the right move for those who want to follow in the way of Jesus.

Let's pray....

God, you came among us as a servant to model the way that leads to fullness of life. Crucify within us every desire that calls us upward and open our ears and our hearts to respond to your call to descend into greatness. We need grace and strength beyond ourselves to live like you, and so we pray that you will generously provide. Teach us to be kind to ourselves and full of wisdom so that we might come to serving others with healthy boundaries and out of a sense of wholeness. And as this day unfolds, in that moment when we find ourselves presented with an opportunity to serve, move us to respond with humility and without hesitation. All this we pray in the strong name of Jesus, the humble servant, and all God's people said...Amen.