

“An Appearance of Wisdom”

Luke 11:1-13; Colossians 2:6-8, 16-23 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – July 24, 2022

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might trust in your Spirit's work in our own hearts and follow Jesus as authentically as we can. In Jesus' name, Amen.

I wonder: have you ever had someone imply that you're doing Christianity wrong? Sometimes people actually come right out and tell you so right to your face. Other times, they just let you know they're judging your faith insufficient through dirty looks and passive aggressive side comments. There are a lot of situations in which this can happen. Some people probably think they're doing you a favor, helping you see the error of your ways. Sometimes, they're trying to “help” you find your way out of a bad situation, by implying that the bad thing happened to you because you weren't worshipping God the right way. Sometimes they just can't keep their mouths shut even though your life is absolutely none of their business.

Sometimes when this kind of judgment falls on us, it's easy to dismiss. We've seen how those folks live their lives, and we don't want to be like them, so why should we worry about what they think? Other times though, it can make us insecure. We probably don't pray as often as we should. We don't necessarily feel all that confident in our knowledge of the Bible. What if depending on God being Love isn't enough? Should we be doing it more like they're doing it? Could we even do that without feeling like hypocrites?

I was trying to see how our scripture readings come together into a coherent message earlier this week, and I was suddenly struck by that phrase at the end of the Colossians passage. Paul has been writing about the strict rules that some folks were trying to impose upon the faith of the those he was addressing. “These have indeed an appearance of wisdom,” he writes. And that’s just it. Paul wants our faith to be more than appearances. He knows that faith that is performative – that is, faith that involves merely acting out rituals that others have told us are the proper way to do things – does not really connect us to Christ. Following rules that others have imposed upon us can actually have the opposite effect, distancing us from God by creating resentment or feelings of shame. Paul knew that faith is more complicated than following a strict set of rules about what we should do and what we can’t do. Faith is full of paradoxes, two-sided realities that seem contradictory but turn out to make sense. Paul is alluding to a sort of paradox here, when he encourages us to understand that faith is at once more complicated than a simplistic set of rules, but also more flexible and liberating.

The passage we read from Luke is also full of paradoxes. “Teach us to pray,” the disciples ask Jesus. So he does, in two different ways. First, he gives them some words, which, as you know, eventually evolved into what we call The Lord’s Prayer. But then he also gives them a lesson about persistence, as if beyond the words, the most important thing about prayer is to keep praying. One of the most obvious paradoxes in this passage is that right after he’s told them a story to illustrate the

importance of persistence, he then throws out some sayings that could imply that answers to prayer come quickly. “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.” This is where we run into danger, because our experience of life has shown us that answers to prayer are rarely that immediate. Someone who thinks we should be praying differently could easily use this verse to try to convince us that we must be praying wrong if we’re not getting the results we wanted.

But the fact that these sayings come right after Jesus’ teaching about persistence leads me to believe he didn’t intend them as promises of immediate gratification. When we pull this verse out of context, we lose the meaning and set ourselves up for disappointment. In the short run, it’s easier to think of Jesus as a vending machine, where we put in our money, in this case, prayers, and then punch in the code to get what we want. But in the long run, we come to see that this isn’t how faith works, and the more energy we put into insisting that’s how it should be, the harder it becomes to embrace faith the way it really is.

There is another paradox embedded in this passage, one that adds even more nuance. The question with this one is about the nature of humankind. In the prayer Jesus teaches his disciples, there is an implication that we humans are ever merciful – “we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us,” it says. But then, by the time he’s finishing up his lesson on persistence, Jesus compares us to God in that final question: “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children,

how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?”
Are we forgiving or are we evil? We’d like a clear answer, but we’ve met humans, haven’t we? So we know the answer is yes. We’re both. We contain the capacity for great good and great harm, and so many different factors play into which path we choose in any given moment.

It is perhaps this paradox – that we want to be good but we’re so often not – that leads to the strict rules that Paul is warning about in Colossians. We know we contain the capacity for evil, so we try to set up guardrails against it. But so often those guardrails themselves become barriers to authentic faith, when we try to enforce them upon one another.

And so we stumble into one of the biggest paradoxes of faith, the problem of organized religion as a whole: we do better when we have some community standards, some rituals and commitments that hold us together and help us determine how to live; but each of us experiences our faith in our own way and must interpret and live within those shared traditions in ways that are true to our own souls. The balance of doing something that is so unique to each individual, together in community, is quite something. It’s no wonder we so often don’t do it well!

If you have ever felt like you were missing something, or like maybe you’re just not a very religious person, or maybe prayer is something you’re never going to quite connect with, or that other people must have a much stronger faith than you, this sermon today is for you. If you’ve ever felt judged by the way you participate in

church or don't or for the things you do or don't do outside of church, Paul is talking to you. Jesus is talking to you! Persist! Keep trying. Someone else's way of praying may not be your way of praying. That doesn't mean there's no way for you to pray; it just means you haven't found your way of praying yet. One way of praying isn't better than another. The best one for you is the one that connects you to the deep compassion at the heart of God. Except you might describe it differently, once you get there.

Someone else in your life may have certain restrictions that they follow carefully as part of their faith. That doesn't mean those same restrictions make sense for you. Or maybe you do stay faithful better when you put certain limitations on what you will and won't do. Someone else telling you those rules are silly and not necessary is missing the point: that they work for you. As long as you're not trying to impose them on others, you can construct whatever structures for faith you need.

This idea that we can't enforce a one-size-fits-all faith practice is central to our Disciples tradition. There is risk here, however, which we see manifesting in the underdeveloped faith lives of many of our most active lay leaders. Knowing that we can't determine the details for everyone, we too often satisfy ourselves with a lowest-common-denominator faith and don't do the work of finding a prayer practice that works for us as a unique individual. It's not just that you have the liberty to find your own unique way of connecting to Christ; it's that you need to, in order to faithfully

follow Jesus. I can't tell you what it will look like, but I can tell you that our church will be stronger as more of us do this internal, spiritual work and figure it out.

The final paradox I want to name, from these scriptures we've looked at today is what lies at the heart of it all. Not only are we called into community, for support in leading our own individual journeys; we're called onto those individual spiritual journeys for the sake of the community. Faith doesn't exist solely to make each of us feel better when hard times come. Jesus taught his disciples to pray using "we" language – Our Father, our daily bread, our sins. Even that story of persistence shows us: the neighbor wasn't woken up at midnight because his friend was hungry. The persistent knocking was so that hospitality could be offered to a traveler. It was for the sake of another.

Even piety can be an opportunity for self-indulgence, Paul warns. That's why community is so important for our individual spiritual journeys, because community is where we're reminded that our faith is bigger than our own hearts. We're here for the sake of one another. We're here for the sake of all God's children. Each of us must connect to Christ, our head, in the ways that are most authentic for us, but once we do, we become one in serving God's world, to bring about the flourishing of all creation. God's kingdom come; God's will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Hallelujah and Amen.