

“Choose To Love and Be Loved” A sermon by Jeffrey Kramer  
Cathedral City Community Presbyterian Church  
November 5, 2017 Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost  
Matthew 23:1-12

### Choose To Love and Be Loved

Today’s Gospel is part of a long criticism of Jesus against the Scribes and the Pharisees. Luke and Mark mention only a few lines of this criticism against the religious heads of the time. It is only the Gospel of Matthew which has a longer presentation of this. What is important in meditating these texts is to discover their objective. Jesus condemns the lack of coherence and of sincerity in the relationship with God and with the neighbor. He is speaking about hypocrisy, that of yesterday as well as that of today, of our hypocrisy!

Jesus addresses himself to the multitude and to the disciples and criticizes the Scribes and the Pharisees. The reason for attacking them is the incoherence between their words and their acts. They speak but they do not do. Jesus recognizes the authority and the knowledge of the Scribes *“The Scribes and the Pharisees occupy the chair of Moses! You must, therefore, do and observe what they tell you, but do not be guided by what they do, since they do not practice what they preach”*.

The fundamental error is incoherence: *“They say, but they do not do”*. Jesus enumerates the diverse points which reveal this incoherence. Some Scribes and Pharisees imposed heavy laws upon the people. They knew the Laws well, but they did not practice them; neither did they use their knowledge to lessen the weight imposed upon the people. They did everything possible to be seen and praised, they wore special tunics for prayer and they liked the first places and to be greeted in the public squares. They wanted to be called “Teacher”. They represented a type of community which maintained, legitimized and nourished the difference of social classes. It legitimized the privileges of the great and the inferior position of the little ones. Now, if there is something which displeases Jesus, it is appearances which deceive.

How should a Christian community be? All the community functions should be assumed as a service: *“The greatest among you must be your servant!”* You should call nobody Teacher (Rabbi), nor Father, nor Guide; because the community of Jesus has to maintain, legitimize and nourish not the differences, but rather the fraternal spirit. This is the fundamental Law: *“You are all brothers and sisters!”* The fraternal spirit comes from the experience that Jesus is Father, and makes of all of us brothers and sisters. *“Anyone who raises himself up will be humbled, and anyone who humbles himself will be raised up.”*

The group of the Pharisees was born in the II century before Christ, with the proposal of a more perfect observance of the Law of God, especially regarding the prescriptions on purity. They were more open to novelty than the Sadducees. For example, they accepted faith in the Resurrection and faith in the angels, something which the Sadducees did not accept. The life of the Pharisees was an exemplary witness: they

prayed and studied the Law during eight hours a day; they worked eight hours in order to be able to survive; they dedicated eight hours to rest. This is the reason why people respected them very much. And in this way, they helped people to keep their own identity and not to lose it.

With time, the Pharisees took hold of power and no longer listened to the appeals of the people, nor did they allow them to speak. The word "*Pharisee*" means "*separated*". Their observance was so strict and rigorous that they separated themselves from the rest of the people. This is why they were called "*separated*". It is typical of the persons who think to obtain justice through the rigid and rigorous observance of the Law. Generally, they are persons who are afraid, who do not have the courage to assume the risk of liberty and of the responsibility. They hide themselves behind the Law and the authority. When these persons obtain an important function, they become harsh and insensitive and indifferent to hide their own imperfection.

*Rabbi, Guide, Teacher, Father.* These are four titles that Jesus prohibits people to use. Today, in Church, the priests are called "Father". Many study in the University of the Church and obtain the title of "Doctor" (Teacher). Many persons receive spiritual direction and take advice from persons who are called "Spiritual directors" (Guides). What is important is to take into account the reason which impelled Jesus to prohibit the use of these titles. If these were used by persons in order to affirm their position of authority and their power, these persons would be in error and would be criticized by Jesus. If these titles were used to nourish and deepen the fraternal spirit and service, they would not be criticized by Jesus.

The warning for us not to put burdens on others. The inability of humans to reach out and to care for one another causes many of us to suffer from a deformed and crippled sense of self. Where, then is help to be found? I need more than an example; I need help. Love requires a miracle because everything conspires to encourage me to define myself at your expense. If I am to grow and be fulfilled, then some of you will have to make do with less. This after all, is the law under which our society lives and works: the law of "*libido dominandi*" (the desire to dominate). We live in a competitive society, and there is only so much wealth to go around. The things of this world are diminished by sharing. We therefore, strive to get as large a slice of life as we can. Love, however, follows a different logic. Love is the one "*commodity*" that is not diminished by sharing. In fact, it is increased. But that takes a lot of faith.

Love always leaves us with the question of choice. Do I find myself scared to step out into the world where my choices matter? Much better to be a victim of circumstances. Victims bear no responsibility. They live in a world where blame and fault can be laid elsewhere. It is true that we are all victims in certain areas of our life. But most of in the West have little conception of what it is like to be victimized by grinding poverty, gnawing hunger, and brutal injustice. We are mainly 'victimized' by the trivial and the inconvenient. We have plenty of leisure time to concentrate on inner tyrannies and addictions: the tyranny of our egocentricity, our addiction to safety and security.

There is no way round the issue of the need to surrender to a “model” or exemplar if we are to move towards psychological and spiritual maturity. Being in love is a key metaphor for understanding the process. The lover is mesmerized by the vision of the beloved. It is the prism through which the whole world is viewed. The lover is swept away and carried along by the passion for the beloved. It is a kind of conversion experience and, like all conversion experiences, can be lived into or betrayed.

Growing spiritually is a matter of choosing a certain paradigm or model. And the choice makes all the difference. Psychoanalysis is one method by which the soul is slowly freed to make a choice. It is one of the disciplines that help us choose not to be victim to our additions and inner tyrannies. Christians center themselves on Jesus, Jews on the Torah, followers of Islam on the Koran, Marxists on Marx, Freudians on Freud, the selfish on themselves.

What is it, then, which unites us all – believers and unbelievers alike? The double desire to love and be loved is common to everyone. It is the ancient drive of Eros that unites us one with another. Eros is not simply the drive towards sexual fulfillment; it is the impulse towards any satisfaction and completion. God is the one who attracts, lures, draws us to himself.

When we talk about love, therefore, we are talking about our proper place in the pattern of things. We are talking about home. We are talking about the limitations and possibilities set by a particular time and a particular place. The unmaking of a soul depends on how far it refuses to follow its own homing instinct. In the Christian tradition this homing instinct is closely related to “God’s Will.” The most famous line in Dante’s *Paradiso* is, “In his will is our peace”, which means that our true home is in the heart of God. To be a lover is, by definition, to be someone who is on the way home.

Perhaps our internal compass knows more than we do. We used to call it our “conscience,” It has often been identified not with our homing instinct, but with the neurotic demands of the superego. Some of us are so confused about what we really want out of life that we often mistake a neurotic demand for a genuine desire to find our way home. We find ourselves on a treadmill looking for love: the treadmill of compulsiveness masquerades as duty; the treadmill of self-absorption is under the cloak of self-expression; the treadmill of moral confusion is done up to look like newness of life.

Love is difficult. It asks us one terrible and demanding question: “What are you going to do now? Now that you’ve stopped blaming your mother, your husband, your wife, your environment, the foreigner, the capitalists, the atheists, the fundamentalists ... What are you going to do?” Being a lover, becoming a soul, means making choices. The key choice is, which paradigm? Who or what is the One for you? Who is the One who is calling you home? I hope the one is Jesus, inescapably Jesus.