

Pentecost 21, Proper 26, Year A, 2014  
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY  
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There are some phrases in Scripture  
that we recognize  
immediately.  
“Practice what you preach.”  
Or as it is here in our gospel reading,  
“They do not practice what they teach.”

We’ve all heard it, leveled most often  
at people in the public eye,  
and especially religious leaders.  
So we’re not surprised to here it here in the gospel according to St Matthew,  
Jesus speaking about the religious leaders - or at least some of them -  
who he sees wandering round him in the temple  
as he sat there, close to the end of his life,  
teaching his disciples.

Those last few days  
had not been easy.  
Jesus had come into the city in triumph,  
people waving palm branches and acclaiming him as king.

But as soon as he went to the temple, to do the religious duties  
of every Jewish man,  
then the trouble began.  
Every time he sat down to talk with his followers,  
other people would gather round  
and then a stranger would come up  
with a difficult question.  
Should we pay taxes to the emperor or to God?  
Which is the most important commandment?

On the surface, the questions looked fine,  
but Jesus knew  
that the whole point of them  
was to trap him,  
to give the leaders who opposed him  
evidence  
to arrest him.

And easy time  
 he answered carefully,  
 and each time  
 the questioner went away frustrated.

But finally Jesus just got sick of it all.  
 And started to bite back.

"The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach."

It's something we've all heard before.  
 Look at that person over there - they talk a lot about their religion.  
 But we never actually see them do anything.  
 Or, did you see that story in Newsday about that preacher?  
 Titillating gossip always feels so satisfying,  
 and so does writing off the person's beliefs  
 because they have failed in living them.

But I don't think that's Jesus' point.  
 In fact, he's pretty clear about it.  
 He says,  
 "You see those people over there: do what they teach - even if they don't."  
 In other words, just because other people are hypocrites  
 you don't have to be.  
 DO  
 what you believe.

You see,  
 it's easy to blame the religious leaders,  
 and in so doing, give ourselves a free pass.  
 But what Jesus really wants  
 is for his followers  
 to take responsibility for their own lives.  
 For not just saying,  
 "Of course I believe it."  
 But for living it.

That's what the people did  
 who we remember today  
 on the Feast of All Saints, faithful people  
 who actually did what they believed.  
 Doctor, queen, shepherdess,  
 soldier, and priest,

and many more.

We read about them week by week at the Tuesday Eucharist.

Living their faith brought them great joy;  
 their lives were characterized by faith, hope, and love,  
 even though for some,  
 it cost them friends, family, their wealth,  
 and even their lives.

But all of them were faithful,  
 and all of them found God to be faithful.

This morning we will baptize  
 baby Lilian.

And we will, once again,  
 say together the baptismal covenant.  
 And what that is, is a chance to say,  
 this is what we believe  
 and this is how we live.

The first part  
 the first three questions,  
 asks what we believe.

And our answers  
 take the form of the Apostle's Creed,  
 one of the earliest attempts of the church  
 when it was just beginning, during the time of the Roman Empire,  
 one of the earliest attempts to summarize  
 what it is  
 that we Christians believe.

We believe in God, Father Son and Holy Spirit.

In a God who created us,  
 a God who became incarnate in Jesus Christ  
 and lived and died and was raised.

We believe in God's Spirit with us,  
 and in that thing we call the church,  
 the gathering of all the faithful,  
 across all countries and traditions,  
 united in our faith in Christ.

We believe in the communion of saints - the great body of the faithful  
 with God, who we join in worship.

We believe that sin can be forgiven, and we ask for that forgiveness ourselves.

We believe in resurrection, that somehow, God will raise us, souls and bodies recreated, reunited. Death is not the end. We will have life everlasting.

And then  
there are five more questions, five questions  
about how it is  
that we will practice  
what we preach.

Will you come to church, worshipping God regularly week by week  
with the rest of God's people?

Will you try to do as God wants, and when you mess up, ask for forgiveness?  
And by implication, as we say in the Lord's Prayer, will you offer forgiveness to others?

Will you share the gospel, will you tell other people  
about how great God is, and how wonderful it is to be a follower of Jesus?  
Will they be able to hear it in what you say?  
Will they be able to see it in what you do?

Will you serve other people, looking for what they need and seeing how you can help?  
And will you serve God, using the gifts that every one of you have been given?

And finally  
will you work to bring God's kingdom on earth?  
Will you work for justice and peace?  
Will you ask how God's priorities might best be served  
as you vote this week?

Will you practice  
what you preach?

For the next five or so minutes,  
we're going to spend some time, as we have a number of times recently,  
talking with one another how we practice what we preach.  
So I'd like you to find one or two people near you,  
preferably not related to you,  
and talk about these questions:

What are two ways  
that you practice what you preach  
in terms of your faith?

And in this stewardship season,  
how does how you spend your money  
reflect your faith?