

First United Methodist Church-Omaha
Dr. Jane Florence
May 19, 2013—Pentecost
Sermon Title: "Holy Unity"
Text: Gospel of Matthew 23:25-28 & Gospel of Thomas 22 & 106



The journal, *Christianity Today*, ran an article this month about a new Barna Group (www.Barna.org) study which claimed that "only 1 in 7 Christians manages to hold Christ-like beliefs and also to act in Christ-like ways." Terms used to describe this in the survey were "hypocrisy" and "Pharisaical".¹

We hear it in public comment, just as it appears on research studies. There is a perception of disconnect between what Jesus taught and what Christians show to the world. There is disconnect between what Christians often say we believe and what we often do. Jesus taught compassion, humility, non-judgment and non-violence. Christians often show the world just the opposite. In other words, our outward appearance does not match our inner convictions. That's called hypocrisy.

One big problem is this is not a new problem for the church; it is a struggle that has been before us since pre-Christianity. Jesus addressed it boldly in his teachings. A warning against hypocrisy is a common theme throughout his message.

Jesus scolded the religious leaders who taught one thing and did another. He scolded the Pharisees who wore fancy robes and looked all holy on the outside, and inside they were filled with greed and self-indulgence. Jesus scolded his followers who stood in judgment of others without closer examination of their own life. He challenged those who would throw stones at others without noticing their own missteps first. He chastised those who were so caught up with the letter of the law that they trampled upon the intent of it.

The two greatest commandments according to Jesus are to love God with all our heart, mind, and soul and to love our neighbor as thyself. Love is not about earning "brownie points" with God. It's not about appeasing a God who needs our worship; as though God's Divinity is dependent on us. Nope, loving God, loving the Divine with all of our being (heart, mind, and soul), and loving others as though our Self and their Self are one and the same image of God is about the very essence of our being. It's about whose we are and who we are at our core. It's about integrity and authenticity. It's about salvation.

Will we just pretend to Love, but have jealousy, greed, and envy as our essence? Or will we be love at our essence? Will we BE LOVE in heart, mind, and soul? All woven together as one. Will we be becoming Love—are we transforming into compassion? Are we liberated from that which holds us back from total love—are we freed from judging others, and freed from the deception the world would have us believe about ourselves? That's salvation.

Maybe one reason it is so hard for us to live out of our true core is we really don't know our true core. There are many layers of messiness that camouflage and deceive us. The world labels us. We wear the branding of our parents, our jobs, our mistakes and successes, our bank accounts, our religions. We are told we are a success; we are told we are a failure. We are told we are a

¹ Melissa Steffan. "Are Christians Really Hypocrites? Barna Researchers Examine Actions, Attitudes" *Christianity Today*. May 3, 2013

saint; we are told we are a sinner. We are told we are a good daughter or a bad girl. We are identified as “gifted” or marked as “slow”. We are told to love our neighbor as we love ourselves, but we can’t do that if we don’t even know who we are.

For both Gnostic and what became “orthodox” Christians, the Way of Jesus meant aligning ourselves both inside and out. Being truly who we are—all the time—on Sunday morning at church, on Tuesday at work or school, on Friday night—while talking to pastor, talking to clients, talking to friends, talking to strangers.

It’s about putting down our masks—the ones we hide behind—hide from the world and ourselves (and God, we think) and aligning heart and soul and mind—inward and outward. “... It entails a journey from life at the periphery to life at the center.”²

It’s a messy, messy journey. We might like to vision our journey as a beautiful athlete in a stunning victory lap—perspiring a bit, but looking more like one who has stepped off the cover of *Sports Illustrated* or *Shape* magazine. I think a more accurate visual would be one of those participants in a “mud run.” Some of you may have seen them. It’s a race with obstacles, up and down embankments and at some point crawling through mud. The participants finish soaked in mud; dirty from head to toe.

What if our main intent was not about trying to figure out the next life, the getting to heaven? What if our main intent was about “loving all others as divine, and starting with knowing ourselves as divine?” Loving God’s creatures—self and all others: that’s loving God.

There is a scene in Thornton Wilder’s Play *Our Town*. The stage manager remarks: “Now there are some things we all know, but we don’t take ‘m out and look at ‘m very often. We all know something is eternal. And it ain’t houses and it ain’t names, and it ain’t earth, and it ain’t even the stars.... Something is eternal, and that something has to do with human beings. ... There’s something way down deep that’s eternal about every human being.

This “something eternal” is the true “I” the spirit. In the state in which we now live, this “I” is submerged.... Its potential is not realized. .. [liberation, freedom, salvation, new birth, enlightenment] is the complete liberation of this “I” from its immersion.³

Jesus says make the outside like the inside. Don’t worry so much about polishing up the outward part of you until you open up and let Light shimmer through the inside. He compares those living in disconnect as “whitewashed tombs”. They might look nice from the outside, but inside there are still rotting flesh and decaying bones if we haven’t done the difficult part of finding ourselves in Truth. What Jesus says in John’s gospel is “live in me and I will live in you, and God will live in us.” (John 14:17) Jesus speaks to the disciples before he leaves them, “If you love me, you will obey what I command. (Love) and [God] will give you another Counselor to be with you forever... the Spirit of Truth. You will know the Spirit, for the Spirit lives with you and is in you.” (John 14:17)

The path of saving ourselves from the branding of the world and from the oblivious, lies in discovery of the “I”—the Christ within. And when we peel back the mud the world has slung on us, we can rediscover the “I” God created. And if we go a bit further we might find the “I” is

² Richard Smoley. *Inner Christianity*. Boston: Shambhala, 2002. p. 78.

³ *Ibid.*

ultimately the same in all of us. We are collectively one great being, ... what is most truly "I" what is most innate and private and essential to myself, is precisely what I share with all other beings"⁴ We love neighbor as self because neighbor is self, and God is at the core of all.

When you make the two one, when you bring the inner to the outer and the outer to the inner... If you make the two into one, neighbor has self—same as you have self.

Oneness, wholeness, completeness, freedom, liberation, and salvation. Our faith speaks of the Trinity as One God, Son, Spirit and Humanity as One body, mind and soul. Christ in us, God in us, Spirit in us. It is in God in whom we live, and move and have our being animated by One Breath, One Flame of Life, One Stream of Energy, One Divine power.

How we achieve authenticity—inner and outer being—how we achieve wholeness, and unity; how we achieve Oneness with God and all others is a difficult journey. We dare not venture there alone.

It is with the Spirit of God that we travel. It is with the companion of pilgrims that we plod. It is with the community of God's people that we help one another along the way. It is through the practices of faith: prayers, community, serving, giving together, not by our efforts alone, but by the gift of God's presence within, God's spirit alive within us.

Come Spirit come. May it be So.

⁴ Ibid. p. 96.