

**Rev. Dr. Bill Smutz**  
**“Without Fanfare”**  
**First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**  
**Sunday, May 2, 2021**

**Deuteronomy 17:14-20**

*When you have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and have taken possession of it and settled in it, and you say, ‘I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are around me’, you may indeed set over you a king whom the LORD your God will choose. One of your own community you may set as king over you; you are not permitted to put a foreigner over you, who is not of your own community. Even so, he must not acquire many horses for himself, or return the people to Egypt in order to acquire more horses, since the LORD has said to you, ‘You must never return that way again.’ And he must not acquire many wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away; also silver and gold he must not acquire in great quantity for himself. When he has taken the throne of his kingdom, he shall have a copy of this law written for him in the presence of the levitical priests. It shall remain with him and he shall read in it all the days of his life, so that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, diligently observing all the words of this law and these statutes, neither exalting himself above other members of the community nor turning aside from the commandment, either to the right or to the left, so that he and his descendants may reign long over his kingdom in Israel.*

**Matthew 6:1, 5-8**

*‘Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.*

*‘And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

*‘When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.*

In these strange days of Covid, there are so many things that are not normal, so many things that have had to change. And I think about those things especially as we come here to church and for a worship service, not to be able to connect physically with one another in the passing of the peace, to have to sit so far apart and maybe not even be in our favorite pew, which is the most important thing--so many pieces that are different. Last Sunday, as I was offering the sermon, which is the first time that I've offered a sermon to a sanctuary with people in it in about seven or eight months, things just seemed off. I couldn't figure out what it was. It just didn't feel right. And that feeling stuck with me all the rest of last Sunday and into the beginning of this week. And finally, it dawned on me that with everybody needing to wear masks and my not being able to see your full faces, I couldn't experience those subtle or not so subtle signs that a congregation offers on how the sermon's going, that it's okay, or that you like it, or that you really don't like it. And I was surprised by how much that threw me off. And I tell you this story only to acknowledge that I know we're all experiencing loss right now in our coming back to worship in ways that just don't quite fit. I wish I had some great wise words to say about this loss, but I don't. I think it's just important that we acknowledge it to each other, that we acknowledge that things are different and that as we go forward, we find ways to speak about this difference and struggle together with this difference and lay the differences that we're struggling most with for God in prayer. And perhaps there will be understanding, or perhaps there will just be a way forward that we find together that we haven't been able to find as individuals.

Okay. That was the first sermon. Here's the second one-- Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward in heaven. In his mountain-top sermon, when Jesus turns to the topics of piety and prayer, he immediately puts his disciples, all of us, in a faith bind with his words about the practice of piety. This bind has to do with the reality that good acts, prayerful acts, acts of righteousness, and justice unavoidably have a public impact as the salt and light which Jesus tells us earlier in this sermon, we disciples are to have and are to be. Since we are to be salt and light to the world, we disciples must necessarily relate to the lives of others. Our discipleship is not simply all about us. Quite to the contrary, our discipleship can really never be about us. What we do to flavor the world around us, what we do to bring light into all those dark places which we encounter, all of these actions are publicly visible or have a public impact or both, which exposes we disciples as the doers of transformative things on God's behalf.

We can't help but to be exposed, to be observed when we do these things which our faith impels us, commands us to do. And so why does Jesus set us up in this way? Why does he put us in this puzzling faith bind? For to not act in order to remain hidden and in the shadows of faithfulness, to not be salt and light, to not perform good acts and acts of righteousness and justice, to not pray is to fail completely, utterly fail completely at being disciples who make a holy difference for others, make a difference as we try to imitate Jesus in our lives and with our actions. And failure to take action as disciples, it seems to me, is the very worst thing that we can do, for when we fail to act, we ignore God's call to us, we let Jesus down, and we leave those in need, those who need our care and our compassion and our love, we leave them in an even more fragile and vulnerable state. The point that Jesus seems to be illuminating for us in this portion of the Sermon on the Mount is that righteousness should never be displayed for personal aggrandizement. And Jesus is our example here, for in his life and ministry. He could have fully claimed his messiah-ship. He could have reminded everyone continually about his interconnectedness with God. He could have demonstrated the totality of his divine powers anytime and anywhere he chose to do so. But instead, Jesus continually embraces his humanness. He is no different, no more powerful, not any better than anyone else, and in this simple humanness that Jesus is always putting forth-- in this simple humanness, Jesus demonstrates the piety that he expects all the rest of us to imitate. Jesus' theme of humility, which has its roots, at least in part, in our lesson from Deuteronomy concerning the proper humility that a king of Israel must have-- Jesus' theme of humility starts from word one of the Sermon on the Mount with the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes, which invite we disciples away from any hint of self-centeredness and call us instead to interdependence one on another, call us instead to not lording it over who we are and what we do to the others we encounter in this world, that cause us to always be about removing the focus from ourselves as individuals and placing proper focus where it properly belongs on God alone.

Only when the faith which we practice is based on justice, on providing for others compassion and equality and food and shelter and health care and access to power and self-determination and kindness and love and so much more--only when our public exercise of faith has to do with justice for others, with justice for all--only in such circumstances is practicing visible piety unavoidable and therefore acceptable. Fine. Even expected. But if our piety, our practice of piety, is based on self-interest and nothing else, well, then my friends, we're in trouble, really deep trouble. Jesus is interested in our actions but he is even more interested in the motives behind our actions. Jesus offers a particular warning to us about actions and motives when it comes to prayer for prayer, as we easily observe in the Gospels, is near and dear to Jesus. It's something he does quite a lot. Jesus simply understands prayer as conversation with God, any conversation with God, all conversation with God for Jesus is considered prayer and conversation with God can be pleasant or it can be angry. It can be formal. It can be relaxed. It can be filled with pain. It can be dripping with sarcasm. It can be offered in a religious space. It can be offered anywhere. Conversation with God, continual conversation with God, is important to Jesus and so it is important for his disciples. It is important for us and most of the details about the content of prayer and the format of prayer, those things don't matter so much to Jesus. But making a public show, making a big display when it comes to prayer, that matters to Jesus because such publicness suggests, screams, that the disciple doing such praying does not take God seriously. Jesus doesn't tolerate not taking God seriously. And the disciple who prays in a way that does not take God seriously dares to use the privilege of

private conversation with God to only bring attention to self, which is never okay with Jesus, never a practice his disciples or any of us, should ever engage in.

In Jesus' day there was a practice by some in the faith community of very public prayer, of praying on street corners, of noticeably standing and praying in the worship space of the local synagogue. Jesus is also critical of such public praying that uses a lot of words, that is long winded, that is full of what he calls empty words, meaningless words. And with great emphasis and without equivocation, Jesus is as clear as he can be that his disciples do not, that his disciples cannot pray in this way, pray in such attention seeking ways. For those who indulge in public prayer, those who indulge in public displays of piety, Jesus uses a curious phrase. They have received their reward. Jesus uses this phrase three times in the Sermon on the Mount, twice in our lesson today, and in each case, it has the same implication. If you show off on Earth, you do not need heavenly recognition. These are words that I think we disciples do well to ponder long and hard.

In this season of Easter, when resurrection invites and compels us to more closely examine Jesus' invitation to us to be his disciples, we're exploring the Sermon on the Mount because at least in Matthew's gospel, in Matthew's telling of this story of the sermon on top of a mountain, this is where Jesus lays out his core values and guiding principles for ministry. These values and principles are things which obviously matter to disciples, things we obviously need to pay attention to. Prayer is our takeaway today, our need to connect with God in prayer, our utter reliance on the vital communication we are privileged to have with God in prayer, prayer is a core value for disciples. Prayer is our ongoing conversation with God. Prayer is more than just a nice idea, more than just a good thing to do when we have a few spare moments around the busyness of our days. Prayer is as vital to our faithfulness and as vital to our living as is our breathing. And so let us practice the piety of prayer with care and with great intentionality. And let us practice the piety of prayer quietly and inconspicuously and with great and deep and abiding humility. Let us practice the piety of prayer everywhere and all the time, praying as if our faithfulness depends on it, because to a large extent it does. Prayer is good spiritual homework for us to be about in the week ahead. So let us pray intentionally. Let us pray joyfully. Let us pray with humility. Thanks be to God who hears our prayers. Amen.