

Scriptures heard in worship: Isaiah 58:1-9 and Matthew 5:13-20

CONSISTENT FOR CHRIST

A pastor tells the story of how he and his wife decided to invite the entire church council and their spouses over to their house for dinner. It was quite an undertaking, but then this pastor and his wife wanted to be salt and light for the leaders of their church.

When it came time for dinner, everyone was seated and the pastor's wife asked her four-year-old daughter if she would like to say grace. The girl replied that she didn't know what to say and the mom said, "Just say what I say, honey."

Everyone bowed their head and the little girl said, "O dear Lord, why am I having all these people for dinner!"

I can remember my very young daughter Sara being a walking recording device as she picked up and said every

word, and mimicked everything Jackie and I did. Perhaps it was the fault of being twenty something at the time, but I truly thought that I had a soundproof bubble around me where I could see and hear out, but no one else could see and hear me unless I wanted them too.

However, with Sara I quickly learned that my words and actions could be heard and I was visible to her and everyone else in the world, and so I had to have consistency in the person I proclaimed to be in church, at work, at school, and at home.

Of course, Sara grew up fast and that bubble returned around me. Again, I thought I could say one thing and do another, have a life as one person in the church, and a different life outside the church. I compartmentalized my life with different hats and different personalities depending

on the people around me. And as long as people only saw the Glenn I wanted them to see, and didn't mix up any of the personalities and people, no one would know the wiser. I could be the holy man, the priest, the pastor, the wise counselor at church or in my official capacity, wherever I had on the collar. Then take off the collar, and go watch football games on television yelling and screaming things at referees that I would never say in church. Or take a drive in my car and say and do things that I would never say and do at church. Of course, if I needed any kind of excuse it would be that everyone does it, everyone has a different person that they show to others depending on the situation or the people around them.

However, with the advent of Facebook, everyone tells everyone else what they are doing, shows pictures and

videos, and say things across the entire spectrum of friends on their list regardless of which category they are in.

Unfortunately, there is not a church friends category or filter where they can only see your sacred words and prayer

requests, there's no way that FaceBook blocks from your

family or church friends that picture you posted to your

other friends when you were in Vegas and you said and did

those things that can only be seen and told in Vegas, right?

Whatever happens in Vegas stays in Vegas...but not on

FaceBook, everyone knows everything about you. And that's

a problem for those of us who like our lives

compartmentalized...it seems that we are so transparent

now, what happens in Vegas doesn't stay in Vegas but is out

there for the whole world to see and hear and talk about.

Our invisible bubble of silence around us is dissolving away and everyone can see and hear what we say and do.

But let me tell you a little secret, I don't know how I can say this delicately, and it may hurt you tremendously to know this.....EVERYONE CAN ALWAYS SEE AND HEAR YOU! THERE IS NO BUBBLE! I know...bummer, huh?

Just like that little four year old daughter who repeated in a prayer the words she heard her mom say, or my daughter Sara who repeated everything she heard my wife and I say... everyone knows what you say, what you do, not just because of FaceBook but because people have always been able to pick up and discern whether the person you say you are is authentically you or not.

What does this inconsistent life and dishonest person we project to others have to do with the scriptures in Isaiah and

Matthew today? Well, the Isaiah passage is the Lord's argument against this inconsistent behavior and life that the people of Israel have picked up. God's argument is that the people go to the Temple every day, pray every day, and fast every day so that God will answer their needs in life. Sounds okay so far...right? But the people's needs and wants are separate from what God wants for them. They wanted bigger houses, more money, more customers, a bigger harvest...the good life as they say, and they were willing to do anything to get it: prayer and fasting to God...and if that didn't work then bribes and corruption, intimidation and extortion, torture, and finally complete indifference to others.

God says, "Wait a minute, you are my people and I want everyone to have all the goodness and abundance of life,

but this mad climbing over people to the top of some mountain of wealth has got to stop. You have to be different from the nations around you, because I have marked you as my chosen people. Here's what I want you to do: feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick, have compassion and care for the widow and the orphan, and then you will have a different view of life and be blessed with all my abundance."

The Pharisees in Jesus' time were the religious leaders of Israel who pretty much got it right as far as Jesus was concerned. They were not the collaborators and sellouts to the Roman Empire like the Sadducees, they were not the terrorists like the Zealots, and they were not the secluded, monastic Essenes out in the desert caves. The Pharisees were out among the people, teaching and preaching the

Torah way of life through written word and spoken interpretation in the synagogues. The problem that Jesus saw was that the Pharisees based their whole interpretation of Torah Law of Moses on the fact that there was too much sin in the world. This sin caused people to be poor, to be blind and lame, to be sick and hungry, to be widowed and orphaned, much of which could be blamed on the Romans that they were powerless to stop. So they hunkered down in their little righteous country club of religious scholars and waited until God got rid of the sin in the world with the end of time, or the Romans left Israel alone. They compartmentalized their life so much that as they walked among the people they refused to see the hunger and the misery around them; this was God's problem, not ours, and God will come one day to fix all of this.

Jesus taught a different interpretation of Torah, he saw God right in the midst of people, even their sin. That God's solution for sin and human misery wasn't a thousand years in the future, but has always been with us, the Kingdom of God is at hand...and for Matthew and us, we believe that Jesus was God incarnate and God's solution to sin. Jesus taught the people again that as Jews they are the light to the nations, that God wants a different way of life for people who call themselves the children of Abraham. They were to help the sick, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and care for the widow and the orphan.

Somehow, they thought there was some sort of bubble around them and even though they called themselves Jews, they worshiped the Lord God of Israel, that they fasted and prayed and did everything according to the Law, they were

exempt from being an example to other people, so they hid their religion in this bubble, they hid their relationship with God thinking that no one would see or hear that they were the chosen people of God, that somehow the mark of God on their lives would be invisible to others. So they compartmentalized their lives...when they were in Temple they said words of God and acted according to the Law...but when they were living in the world, they lived according to the customs and people around them...and no one would know they were Jews.

But you know the secret, right, that there is no bubble? Everyone can see and hear you, everyone knows deep down if you are being authentically you or if you are acting a role or persona. Way before FaceBook, people knew if you were

a Jew or a Christian or if you weren't. It was as plain as the nose on your face.

So here we are in the 21st century in Redlands, California and we still think that there is a bubble around us. That people in the neighborhood won't see us coming and going from this church, that people in our workplaces won't discern that we are marked by Water and the Spirit...they just think we are one of the guys or girls, no different from anyone else. We still think that even though we have a Christian fish or Bible saying or a cross on our car that people can't read lips as they hear or see us cussing them out as we drive. We still think that our family and friends can't hear us yelling at the referees with words that your mom would wash out with soap; or that if they really saw us they would take away the buckets of alcohol you drink and

the fridge full of food you eat and the cartons of cigarettes you smoke. We think that there is a place and time to be Christian disciples of Jesus and a place and time to be someone else...some people even call that other self their true self and the Christian stuff is the persona and acting.

If this is the extent of our witness; that what people see and hear is dishonesty and no integrity in our life for Christ, then no wonder that Christianity is becoming extinct in North America. It's not the government or the ACLU that is attacking Christianity, the enemy is within us, in the American Church no matter what denomination. If non-believers see and hear that we are just like them, that we hold no truth, that we want to hide our light under a basket and throw out the salt of God's message of grace because we want to live our own lives in the bubble of our car or our

television room or our computers or our workplaces or gathering with friends...then no wonder that non-Christian people say that we are hypocritical, judgmental, and lost in some delusion. No wonder that our churches are losing members and no one is coming to replace them. No wonder that the American church has bowed down to the altar of technology and created entertainment worship and spiritual fast food and self help Christianity where you can live a private, personal relationship with God and no one will ever know. Who will rescue us from this body of death called Christianity in America? Jesus Christ, the head of the Body, that's who!

I see a new generation of believers in Jesus, young and old, who have renounced the spiritual forces of wickedness and the evil powers of this world, and repented of their sin. I

see a generation forming where consistency, integrity, and authenticity in our whole lives as baptized Christians is becoming a priority rather than hiding the light of Christ in some private Christian bubble. I see that generation starting right here in this church...when you see the words Disciple of Jesus and a blank line next to it, people in this room are signing their names next to it, and we are unashamed to say words and act like Jesus Christ would say and act in our homes, in front of our televisions and computers, in our cars, and even in our workplaces and gatherings with people. I see people holding themselves accountable in groups gathered in homes during the week, as they know the secret that there is no bubble, and that everyone knows if we are being honest in our life. They want to move a step closer to what God wants them to be every week.

That isn't to say that this new generation of Christian disciple is perfectly authentic and consistent in their whole life...we still have bubbles that blind our eyes and sin still wars within our heart. We realize that we cannot change ourselves, our sin, our lives, or our church...only Jesus can do that.

I will conclude this message with sharing with you one of the most powerful scenes I have read in my life. I have recently begun reading the "Chronicles of Narnia" by C.S. Lewis and I am on the last chapter of "The Voyage of the Dawn Treader". Disney released a movie based on this book, but they sucked out all of the power from the author's words by changing the scene.

The story of this book centers on the main character of Eustace, a young teenager who thinks he knows everything

and puts everyone down as stupid, or ignorant, or plain incompetent...the consummate critic, which the English describe as a beastly person. Well, on one of the islands that the ship named "The Dawn Treader" discovers with Eustace something incredible happens. Eustace runs away from the ship because he can't stand these stupid people anymore, and finds himself in a ravine with a large pool of water, and a cave that is occupied by a dragon. The dragon doesn't care about Eustace, it is so preoccupied with sadness, and ends up drinking the water in the pool and falling down dead. Eustace goes into the cave and finds a mountain of treasure. He fills his pockets full of the dragon's wealth but falls into a deep sleep. Eustace then wakes up and discovers that he now is a beastly dragon! To make a long story short, Eustace ends up going back to the ship,

and feels incredibly sad all the time because of the beast he turned into. Well, after a few weeks of being on the island, the sailors are restless to move on but they can't take a dragon with them on a boat...yet they can't bring themselves to tell Eustace. One night Eustace has a dream, in this dream he is standing by a pool of water and the great Lion Aslan who is the Son of the Emperor, and who sang the world of Narnia into existence, is standing next to the pool. Aslan tells Eustace that in order to get in the pool he will have to undress. So Eustace pulls off his scales, kind of like peeling a banana he says, or a snake shedding its skin, and all of his skin is in a pile...but he is still a dragon. Three times Eustace sheds his skin and tries to become something different, but each time he is still a beastly dragon. Finally, the great Lion Aslan says, "Let me undress you". So Eustace

the dragon gets on his back and allows the Lion to tear into him with his terrible claws. Eustace describes it as like having his heart cut out of his chest, it was so painful, but when Aslan was finished, he was a boy again. Aslan tells him to get in the pool and the pain subsides, and Eustace comes out of the water a brand new person...a son of Adam once again.

I don't know about you but as I read that scene I was so moved by the fact that I cannot change who I am inside, that no one can remove the sin within us no matter how hard we try or the amount of willpower we use. It is Jesus who needs to cut out the sin in me, remold me and make me a new creation, and finally sanctify that justifying act of grace by the water of baptism and the Holy Spirit. I cannot remove the bubble around me, I cannot change the way I

try to act one way in one group and say things another way in another group of people, it is Jesus who must and who will change me, if I lie down and let him. It is Christ who must and who wants to change you, to make you a new person, made in the image of God as God designed you to be. It is Christ who must and who longs to change the Church, from our sinful ways of being hypocritical and having poor integrity in our representation of Jesus to the world...where Jesus makes us into a new generation of Christians following Jesus in all of our acts of piety, study, and Christian works of justice and love.

Are you ready to be consistent in your life with Jesus Christ as your Lord? Are you finally ready to be stripped of your beastly dragon self and reclothed in the garments that Jesus gives you? Come to the table of grace this morning.