

“Lives of Distinction”
Esther 3:8-14; Romans 12:1-13;
Mark 7:1-16

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Last week I noted from the words of St. Francis that idea that we should preach the gospel always, and when necessary, use words. It is the idea of being able to be seen as showing the gospel, being distinctive people, that caught my attention. And yet we need those words. In many ways it is the words of Jesus today that flip things a little bit, that bring some interest and challenge to us. He is inviting people to be distinctive people, not to simply let tradition define who they are or to use that tradition for their own means.

There is a long history of the Jewish people being distinctive people. That’s what that passage from Esther is about. They were distinctive enough people that people knew who they were. The whole story of Esther is about the courage of Esther and the wisdom of Mordecai to help their distinctive people not be exterminated as Hyman wants to do in this passage that we read today.

The passage that sparked this whole thought for me was one from Acts, chapter 24, where Paul is going before Felix and Agrippa because some of the Jewish folks want him killed because he’s a distinctive person. He admits it during the trial. He’s a person of the Way, as it was called—the Way of Christ.

It is that idea of being distinctive that was interesting to me. Why is that difficult? Why is it interesting that there are distinctive people? I think that as people we struggle with the need to fit in. We don’t always want to be different. We want to know where we fit. We use that idea of fitting to think about belonging, but sometimes it’s simply changing the color, that is, the nature of who we are, the way we look, or what we do to try to fit. It’s a struggle. It’s a strong force.

I have a picture of myself when I was on the Semester at Sea that I talked about last week. I was on the boat in San Francisco before we left, and I had these long white socks and shorts on. It’s kind of painful to look back at that and to see how out-of-it I was in terms of the situation and culture of the time and place. But why should it be painful? It’s that power of fitting in that makes it painful, and how clearly I didn’t fit in. So it’s a painful memory.

What if we try to fit in? Sometimes we recognize that trying to fit in doesn’t work. We realize that we’re trying to do something that just doesn’t fit with who we are or what we believe or how we see the world working. So it’s that struggle around how we fit. I think we have a desire, an internal need, to fit in some way and through fitting to belong to something and to belong someplace. But how do we decide where that is?

Jesus is inviting the people of his day to be distinctively different—to be able to be seen against the background of the day as different—and that is a bit of a struggle. We

can see the challenge he presents to the Pharisees. I sometimes wonder if it's a little harder to see the challenge he presents to us, to me.

It's easy, in fact, to begin to think that I have this sense of understanding, that I know the things to do. In fact, there's a temptation, as I begin to think about what it means to be a distinctive Christian, to simply talk about the kinds of things that show our distinctiveness, like giving at the right time. I know some of those things. And yet when I hear Jesus talking with the Pharisees, it makes me wonder. Even the things I know I should do as a Christian, do I do them in a way that shows the goodness of Jesus?

I was so struck, and I'll use it again, by the interview I heard last week which described Christians like this: hypocritical, controlling, fun-dampening haranguers. Why is that what is seen? It makes me think about what is behind what I do. Why is it that Christians aren't described as people of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, self-control and goodness or generosity? Those are the gifts of the Spirit. It made me wonder.

As I hear Jesus talking to the Pharisees, it makes me realize there's a deeper level. It's not just the action itself; it may be the motive behind it. This is *The Message* translation of what Jesus says to the Pharisees:

These people make a big show of saying the right thing, but their heart isn't in it. They act like they're worshiping me, but they don't mean it. They use me as a cover for teaching what suits their fancy, ditching God's command and taking up the latest fads.

I think he's suggesting that they are self-promoting. They are simply using religion as a ruse to feed their greed. It's no wonder that religion gets a bad name because it can be used—Jesus notes this—as a ruse to feed one's own greed.

It brings that question of motive to me. What's behind it? What's underneath? What's the reason I do what I do? For me, the Christian faith begins with the motive of gratitude. It's a recognition that God loves us, that God forgives us, and that God guides us and there is this gratitude that starts it all.

But I'll say I don't think gratitude is enough. It's a good starting place and it's a good part of who we are and what we do, but it leads us to open our hearts to Jesus. The struggle is to allow Jesus to truly transform us by the renewal of our minds that we might discern the will of God. It's easy to be thankful for something good that God has done for us. It's a little different to go on and recognize that through that gratitude we have a door open to us to a way of life. It's easy to get stuck in a way of doing things.

I remember when I was in Lake City I had a Bible study. We met every Wednesday night in the summertime and I thought things were going great, but I had one guy tell me, "I'm not going to come anymore." I asked, "Why?" He said, basically, "I've got things decided and I don't want them to be challenged."

How can we allow ourselves to continually be transformed by the renewing of our minds that we might discern the will of God? One way of thinking about that is to allow ourselves to be open to what Jesus is saying and doing. Not holding the door shut, but allowing him to take off the blinders, the way we confine things so we don't see what we don't want to see, but instead letting his light begin to shine on our lives. And how do we do that?

One is beginning with the gratitude, recognizing the grace of God and forgiveness. The second piece of that is to ask where I am going with that. Where do I fit? Because as we begin to recognize what Jesus asks us to do, how the Spirit might transform us from within to be those fruits of the Spirit, we might see that there are times we feel like a square peg being pushed into a round hole. It is that question: how do I fit? What do I fit into? Do I simply fit into my society, which is sometimes the easier thing to do? Do I fit in by trying to be something that I'm not, but that's what I think I should be? Or do I fit with what Jesus teaches? To whom or what am I listening? What is shaping my life? What do I fit in with? Am I fitting into God's calling?

You see, we're all welcome at the table. We're welcome to experience the grace of God. We're welcome to hear Jesus' teaching. We're welcome to go on that road of life and to learn the pattern of righteousness that God would give us. I think it's just hard sometimes to think that I fit there or that it might mean that I don't fit somewhere else. I may not fit with a group of friends. I may not fit in this particular society in a particular way. I may not fit, but it is as we allow ourselves to be open to what God does to transform our lives through the renewing of our minds, there's that element of seeing differently, of discerning the will of God.

I think part of that discernment is to see where I fit, how I'm fitting, what I'm fitting with. When I'm open to the teaching and guidance of Jesus, following Him, I may not fit everywhere, but I will fit one place. I will fit on the way, on the road with Jesus. Amen.