Sunday, October 30, 2005
THE DANGER OF VIRTUE
Matthew 23:1-12

St. John Chrysostom said, “Where virtue is, there are many snares.” Jesus would have agreed. He was all in favor of virtue, but he also knew the danger. Many people speak approvingly about virtue; they know what it is, but do not live virtuous lives. That’s what Jesus was warning his followers about in the story from Matthew’s gospel for today. He said, and I’m paraphrasing, “Be careful especially of religious people who talk about virtue but do not practice what they teach. In so doing, they exalt themselves. They believe they are virtuous because they are convinced that they know more than others about God and God’s ways. They even believe God loves laws. They lack humility.”

Then Jesus added this warning: “All those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Virtue can be dangerous. A major cause of the danger of virtue, according to Jesus, is religious dogmatism. The more dogmatic you are in your religious beliefs and practices, the more you tend to believe that you are virtuous. When you are proud of your virtue, you have little humility. The worst evil comes not from the lack of good; the worst evil comes from the perversion of the good. Any virtue can become dangerous.

One historical example is Adolf Hitler. He was proud of his virtue of temperance. He would not drink any alcoholic beverages and was a vegetarian. He claimed this helped keep his mind and body pure. He was devoted to the virtue of purity. This same devotion, wildly misunderstood and misapplied, ultimately led him to commit genocide. He wanted to purify the human race.

In our own country’s history, people who considered themselves virtuous accused innocent women of being witches.

I’ve known people who love humankind but cannot stand individual human beings. And there are those who claim to love God so much that they can bomb abortion clinics or drive truckloads of explosives into embassies, or fly airplanes into the World Trade Center and Pentagon.

Whenever your virtue blocks your commitment to the common good, you fall victim to idolatry. Apart from community, righteousness becomes self-righteousness. The virtues of patriotism and loyalty can be the sponsors of fanaticism. Even love, if not grounded in mutual esteem and respect, soon leads to possession — possessing your “loved one” as an object, or being possessed by your passion. The paradox is that every virtue, when placed on a pedestal, is potentially deadly.

According to Jesus, there’s a special danger in the virtue of being religious. Here’s how it begins: The most basic human need is to survive. Physical survival needs are obvious — food, water, shelter, rest, etc. The non-physical needs are also important but not as obvious. You need a purpose for living, for survival. Therefore, it’s not surprising that Rick Warren’s book The Purpose Driven Life continues to be a best-seller. All lives are purpose-driven, some by positive purposes and others by negative ones.

All religions attempt to answer the “purpose” question. Religions try to help you know that life is more than surviving — eating, sleeping, working, growing older, and dying. Therefore, most religions teach that you are connected to the source of all life — God, and through God, connected to each other.

Many religions then claim they can help you keep your connection to God by promulgating certain rules and rituals. You are taught that if you follow these rules and rituals, not only will you stay connected to God, the source of life, but you will also earn God’s approval, and your life will be better.

This is the context for the story read today from Matthew’s gospel. Jesus is speaking to the crowds, explaining that the religious authorities of that time put heavy burdens on people by insisting they follow all the religious rules to the letter and that if they don’t, God will be angry.

At the same time, Jesus acknowledges that the religious tradition they represent is important, but like all religious traditions, the dogma can become so complicated, burdensome, and rigid that soon the God behind the dogma is forgotten and lost. God’s grace, God’s love, gets lost in the process.

The danger is that there are always those who, in their attempt to earn God’s love and acceptance, go out of their way to follow all the rules exactly. In so doing, they come to believe that they are better than others who do not follow every detail or every ritual. Such people become self-righteous and therefore lack humility.

Remember, Jesus was not saying that religious rules and rituals are bad. On the contrary, he affirmed the commandments, especially, “You shall love your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” However, he also reminded his followers that you do not earn God’s love by following the commandments. They are not to be seen as a burden but as a gift. You are able to love God and to love your neighbor because of God’s love for you.

Being religious as a virtue can be dangerous if you believe you have earned God’s love with your correct beliefs and your faithful following of all the religious rules. That virtue is dangerous because it leads to exclusiveness — the belief that God loves you and your kind of people more than others. Some people then even come to believe that they have the obligation to separate themselves from others who are not of the same belief, and that they need not be concerned about those others because they are not worthy of God’s love.

Jesus continually challenged this kind of religious exclusiveness, as did the prophets and other writings in the Jewish tradition. The story of Jonah in the Old Testament is a warning against religious exclusiveness. It is a strong rebuke against the expectation that God will annihilate unbelievers. It says that those who know of God’s unconditional love have a duty to those who do not know of God’s love. God does not belong to any group exclusively.

The purpose of the story of Jonah is to break through the dogmatism of that time and every time. It proclaims what Jesus taught — that God is the God of all people and loves all people, no matter what their ethnic origin and no matter what their sin.

According to the story, God told Jonah to go to Nineveh. Jonah did not want to go because Nineveh symbolized the worst sin and evil in the world. It symbolized idolatry, brutality, and blasphemy. It’s the kind of place that a virtuous person would avoid at all costs. Jonah was

convinced that the people of Nineveh did not deserve to hear of God's love and forgiveness. Yet, according to the story, God was passionately concerned for the people of Nineveh. God not only wanted to save the people of that city, but also wanted to heal Jonah of his lack of humility. God wanted Jonah to understand how dangerous his religious virtue had become.

Jesus also knew that another danger connected to the virtue of being religious is that it can cause you to look downward rather than upward.

To illustrate this danger, Jesus told a story about two men who went to the temple to pray. One was a respected community leader and the other a man who was not respected. The community leader was very religious in his practice and prided himself on following all of the rules and rituals.

You can tell at once whether a person's heart is in something when it touches their money. This man was proud of himself for giving a tenth of his income to the church. For him, God was at least as real as the money in his billfold and bank account. He was the kind of person churches even today would love — a congregation full of people with his devotion, people who care enough to be faithful in their commitments, people who tithe on their income and who are grateful that they can.

The other man, who was not respected, was a despised tax collector. He was the kind of man who exerted a corrupting influence in the community. Yet in the story, following their prayers in the temple, Jesus praised the despised man and criticized the other.

Why? Sometimes the standard answer is that everything looks different from God's point of view. But this is too easy an answer and only raises more questions. Does God always turn your values upside down? Why then in the story is the tax collector's prayer accepted by God and that of the religious leader rejected?

It has to do with how each of these two individuals sees themselves and how they arrive at their self-understanding. The religious leader in the story measured himself by looking downward when determining his rating before God. He chose the corrupt tax collector as his standard. Then, of course, the differences between them are obvious. Sure, he knows he has his faults. He does not claim to be perfect. He knows the temptations that trouble him, but he has controlled them. By comparison, he looks pretty good.

He doesn't give God thanks that he has been spared from being a thief, adulterer, or tax collector. Listen to his prayer: "God, I thank you that I am not like other people." Really? Now he has stopped praying and started peeking. Coolly, he measures himself against another person and is pleased with the difference. Whenever you want to measure yourself downward, you can always find someone who is worse than you.

Not only that, when you use this kind of measurement, you can easily become very content with yourself. You aren't challenged to make any changes. You can feel so much better about yourself because you are measuring yourself against someone you consider worse.

When I was growing up, there was a dairy company that advertised its product with the slogan, "Milk From Contented Cows." The ad implied there was also milk that comes from discontented cows. I wonder if anyone could tell the difference.

When you begin to measure yourself downward, it's easy to become too content with yourself. The greater danger is that you will think of yourself as better than others and be short on humility. That's why human beings love gossip. It's why people take delight in discussing the private weaknesses and failures of others. Then you can feel so much better about yourself because you are thinking, "Such things don't happen in my life." You can come to feel very virtuous.

How then can you overcome the danger of virtue? The first step is not to measure yourself downward. Quit comparing yourself with others. Jesus taught that God does not evaluate you by comparing you with others. All God wants to know is what you have done with what you have been given.

The second step is to remember that the moral principles given by God are a gift, not a burden. Following them to the best of your ability is not for the purpose of making you better than others, or for earning God's love. The purpose of following God's commandments is for making your life healthier and happier, and for enhancing the life of every person. The foundation of all morality is this: does this action enhance life, or does it denigrate life? Does it build up or tear down? Remember, Jesus said, "I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly." Amen.