

Essentialism: Identifying Role

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on November 5, 2017
on Matthew 23:1-12 at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

A young seminary graduate came up to the lectern, very self-confident and immaculately dressed. He began to deliver his first sermon in his first church and the words simply would not come out. Finally he burst into tears and ended up leaving the platform obviously humbled. There were two older ladies sitting in the front row and one remarked to the other, "You know, if he'd come in like he went out, he would have gone out like he came in."¹

You have to wonder if this thought is on Jesus's mind as he has yet another run-in with the religious authorities in today's text. Let's refresh our memories and remember that we're nearing the conclusion of the Gospel of Matthew. Ever since he entered Jerusalem for the final time, Jesus has had encounter after encounter with the scribes and Pharisees. They've tried to trap Jesus, question him, anger him, and get a rise out of him, and so far they've been unsuccessful.

But like that young seminarian just a little too sure of himself, the religious authorities are about to receive a humbling. "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat," Jesus begins. Meaning — they hold the position of authority within our tradition, their role is clear. "So do what

¹ Story told to me from dear friend, Garrett Vickrey.

they teach you; heed their lessons," he finishes. "But" — and here the turn in the text is devastating — "don't do what they **do**, because **they** don't practice what they teach!" *The Message* translation says it best: "They talk a good line, but they don't live it... It's all spit-and-polish veneer. Instead of giving you God's Law as food and drink by which you can banquet on God, they package it in bundles of rules, loading you down like pack animals. They seem to take pleasure in watching you stagger under these loads, and wouldn't think of lifting a finger to help. Their lives are perpetual fashion shows, embroidered prayer shawls one day and flowery prayers the next. They love to sit at the head table at church dinners, basking in the most prominent positions, preening in the radiance of public flattery, receiving honorary degrees, and getting called 'Doctor' and 'Reverend.'"² *Ouch!* Talk about a lecture of "what not to do" in leadership!

Now I'll admit that as the one up here in a robe behind a pulpit with a microphone and bearing the title 'Reverend,' this passage hits a little close to home! When Jesus gets to talking about the nature of religious leadership, I think all of us in these types of roles should listen with a heap of humility and a heavy dose of self-reflection, looking for the logs in our own eyes anytime we think of pointing out another's. But I also hear in today's text an invitation to every one of us, regardless of who we are, to consider how we are looked to in our role as leaders — both individually

² Matthew 23:3-7 as quoted in *The Message*

and congregationally. I say this not to let myself off the hook, but rather as an invitation for all of us to hear a word from the Lord today.

Now you might hear me talk about each and every one of us as a leader and think to yourself — preacher, are you crazy? I'm not a leader! I believe that old adage that 'leaders are born and not made.' I like to go with the flow, do whatever everyone else is doing, or even hide out in the back of the Sanctuary! Me? A leader? No way!

But oh how I'd beg to differ. Researcher Ron Heifetz reminds us: "rather than define leadership either as a position of authority in a social structure or as a personal set of characteristics, we may find it a great deal more useful to define leadership as an activity... the activity of a citizen from any walk of life mobilizing people to do something."³ Thus, leading as an activity applies to presidents, CEOs, and directors, just as much as it does to clerks, cooks, and cleaners. When we assume that leadership falls only to those who **think** that they're leaders or who are in very obvious roles that demand leadership, then almost without realizing it, all the rest of us relinquish our right and responsibility to lead in our own way. But in the spirit of Ralph Waldo Emerson who once said, "Your actions are so loud I can't hear what you are saying," we acknowledge

³ Ronald Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, p20.

that each and every one of us who claim the title 'Christian' has the capacity and the calling to **do** the gospel, not just proclaim it.⁴

So beyond our role as individual Christians, what about our church's role as a body of Christians, a beloved community called to live and love our world for such a time as this? What implications does today's text have upon us as a whole?

A little more than 10 years ago, our church commissioned a study of nearly 80 individuals picked at random, folks representing all ages, races, and genders here in downtown Winston-Salem. The questions they were posed pointed toward a key wondering of First Baptist that drove the study: "what could First Baptist Church on Fifth do to improve the quality of experience for those who live, work, or play downtown?"

Perhaps to keep the research broad, the questioners asked respondents about their experience with the downtown churches — not just First Baptist in particular. To the question about what downtown churches could do to improve their experience of downtown, people's ideas were numerous. Some wanted the churches to entertain them more: treat the community to ice cream socials, put on rock concerts and soccer tournaments, host bazaar events and children's carnivals. But honest to God, most asked for churches to do what they do best: feed the hungry; house the homeless; educate the marginalized; care for the hurting, those

⁴ Quote told to me by Rev. Garrett Vickrey. It can be found here: <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/486985-your-actions-speak-so-loudly-i-can-not-hear-what>

with broken relationships, those who don't know hope, those on the brink; unify with other churches for the good of the people they seek to serve.

But when they were asked about their perception of all the downtown churches — about these Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists, Episcopalians, Lutherans, and Moravians — that's when their answers begin to sting, no matter your denomination. "Huge, institutional, exclusive, demographically homogenous, old, wealthy, closed off, a fortress, monuments of the past, no one welcomes you but they welcome your money, like an empty WalMart - big buildings with nothing in them."⁵
Ouch!

As one who has lived seasons of life both firmly within and outside of the walls of a church, I get these perceptions, even if I may not agree with them or find them to be accurate. And in a day and age that grows even more anti-institutional, suspicious, cynical, and disconnected practically by the minute, I get that we the church have our work cut out for us as we identify and clarify our role in the community. We have to wrestle with these perceptions and misperceptions, as well as the mantle of leadership we carry. I'm sure it's not a surprise to you that being the "First Baptist Church on Fifth" still affords us a certain level of social status and authority within the community. Because we've been around for nearly 150 years as a people and an institution engaged in the life of the city,

⁵ Information from the Annese Report, a downtown survey conducted by Annese Public Relations and presented January 8, 2007 for First Baptist Church on Fifth.

First Baptist often gets a seat at the table, in those “rooms where it happens.”⁶ So given that reality, how then shall we lead?

Many of us referenced all of this on Wednesday night, as together we mined our past history as a church for the values captured within. We told stories of our long history of innovation — the first gym in downtown, the first racially-integrated educational space for children in Forsyth County, the half-dozen sister Baptist churches (like Knollwood, Pfafftown, Friends, Stanleyville Baptist Churches) birthed from First Baptist, the other half-dozen social service ministries (like Crisis Control, Samaritan Ministries, Habitat for Humanity of Forsyth County, City With Dwellings, Serving Our Savior ramp-building, the Winston-Salem Center for Education and the Arts) that our city has come to entirely rely upon to meet the most basic needs of food, clothes, shelter, money, education, accessibility. We voiced memory after memory of our own hospitable welcome by the folks at First Baptist — for the single mom whose church family helped her move a number of times during that season of life; for the scholarship funds or counseling funds that liberated us in substantial ways; for a number of us who received profound care from their church family following the loss of a loved one or a season of suffering; for the way that, no matter one’s age, ability, life stage, gender, orientation, race, or walk of life, the spirit of inclusion here was real and broad enough to catch us all

⁶ Credit to Lin-Manuel Miranda for coining this catchphrase in the massive hit musical *Hamilton* in 2015, a phrase that describes where deals get made and power meets power.

and then change us all because of it. We spoke of what we've learned over our years about God through First Baptist — Bible drills and meaningful small group studies, mission trips where Word became flesh, and worship experiences that have transformed us to live the 'worship that is our very lives.'

I don't know about everyone else, but as the exercise unfolded, I found myself so energized thinking about how the ministries and missions and people of First Baptist have changed the landscape of Winston-Salem. But please know that I'm not taking a page from the scribes' and Pharisees' handbook — naming this to puff ourselves up with pride, or to say that our work here is done. Rather, I say this to bear witness to what God has done in and through our church over the years. God in and through First Baptist has done tremendous good. And for that, I give thanks!

But lest we stop there... lest we think our best days of innovative, inspirational, and inclusive ministry are behind us... lest we get too comfortable in our church's social location, too habitual in our individual roles within it, too risk-averse to try something new, might First Baptist take our cue from Jesus? Might we model our role as a community of faith from the one who became a servant to all? Might we guard ourselves against being those who talk the talk, but can't proverbially walk the walk? Might we shift course if we find ourselves like those religious authorities — enjoying been seen by others, relishing the attention we're

receiving, savoring those places of honor we're granted? Might we keep the essentials, essential?

And what does Jesus say is essential in leadership? "The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted."

One tremendous takeaway from the downtown survey I told you about earlier came in an answer to a question about what downtown would be like without the churches. Despite some bellyaching about what more churches should do, one respondent wisely said this: "if downtown had no churches, we would be like a city without a soul."⁷

At the "Let Justice Sing Down" hymn festival we hosted this weekend, we sang a new hymn together, whose chorus said this: "God has work for us to do, God has work for us to do, till God's will is done and all things are made new, God has work for us, work for us to do!"⁸

First Baptist Church, we have a role with a soul... a role that we as individuals and a beloved community have the tremendous opportunity to live into with all that we are and have and desire to be! Because God has work for us to do! For saints and sinners and servants alike, may we all answer with humility and courage! Amen.

⁷ Quote taken from Annese Report.

⁸ "God Has Work for Us to Do," a hymn written by Carl P. Daw and Mark A. Miller, sung in the "Let Justice Sing Down" hymn festival at FBCWS November 3-4, 2017. OneLicense #A-701691.