

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

23rd Sunday after Pentecost

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Text: Matthew 22:34-46

Title: "Outside My Own Little World: Give Me Open Hands and Doors"

As a hunter and a lover of God's creation, I find joy in being outdoors. Actually, it's deeper than that: being outdoors connects me with the Spirit of God in ways I can hardly explain. I've experienced God in nature repeatedly, consistently. Sometimes God comes with a sense of awe when I've been in the mountains or simply paused to appreciate a spectacular sunrise or sunset. Sometimes I hear the voice of God when I'm pondering some question and an answer comes in my deer blind. Sometimes just feeling the wind brush against my cheeks reminds me that God is like the wind. As Jesus says in the Gospel According to John:

The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." (John 3:8)

I'm guessing that many of you know what I'm talking about.

So when someone says to me they don't go to church because their church is in the woods, I understand what's being said. It is a place to meet God, to worship God. It is one way and one place to do so.

But there's something missing when alone in the woods: people. It's not really very difficult to understand though is it? Sometimes we just want to escape having to deal with people. There are personalities that just rub us the wrong way, people who place demands on us that create anxiety in us, people who have very different values or beliefs and who live their lives in ways that make us cringe, people who have opposing political or religious or social views: it gets messy doesn't it? Christian writer, G.K. Chesterton once joked that "Jesus commanded us to love our neighbors and our enemies because they are generally the same people".

Some of these same people claim to be spiritual but not religious. Those who worship God in the woods exclusively would be included in this group. These are folks who are interested in and open to God and holiness and the sacred in life. Mystery and a personal, individual experience of spirituality is something they resonate with and value, but there is no interest in communities of people with similar interests because that requires taking other people and their opinions and problems seriously. Or maybe it's about being happy to love God whom they cannot really see but not wanting to get involved with neighbors whom they can see.

I expect there might be a bit of spiritual but not religious in all of us. We want to love God. We are drawn to God as Jesus has made God known, but then there are the people. What do we do with the people who sometimes make life so difficult? Sometimes I expect we just want to walk away when the

frustrations build. After all, we can worship God anywhere, right?

I sometimes wonder if Jesus ever felt that way. I mean up on the mountain or in those lonely places when he went off to pray, to be with God alone, the love of God was in those moments. But then when he'd come back to the crowds, there were the people and not all of them were adoring or respectful or appreciative.

Take the Sadducees and the Pharisees. These were two groups of highly religious people. The Sadducees were the more professional, priestly of the two. They believed that only the Torah-- the first five books of the Bible--was authoritative and that there was no resurrection, no life beyond this life. They were the priests and conservative priests at that in that they were concerned about preserving the traditions.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, were laity. They had gained influence and power with the people as they were seen to be more progressive. They believed that the law of God found in the Torah needed to be applied to changing circumstances and so they included the prophets and the writings in their authoritative scripture. They were sincere and serious practitioners of their religion as they attempted to live their lives within the bounds of religious rules they understood to be from God. They worked hard at being pure and set apart from secular society.

So when Jesus comes along and starts befriending women who sold physical pleasure in order to make a living and men who made a living by being the modern equivalent of loan sharks taking more from people than was just, these two religious groups had a problem with him. He was crossing lines he shouldn't have been crossing and it made them uncomfortable and angry.

In today's reading, Jesus had already rebuffed the Sadducees and now the Pharisees were up to bat. After their caucus they choose one among them who knew their 613 laws well to ask Jesus a question "to test him" it says in Matthew.

When I was serving as a youth ministry coordinator for the Saginaw Bay District years ago, we developed a program called "YAH"—Y...A...H. It stood for "Youth Against Homelessness", and it was a little like "One Week/One Street" in that we collaborated with Midland Area Homes to find home repair or improvement projects for people living in Midland County and then matched youth groups from across our district with the projects. We spent a week in the summer making those repairs.

Because the first year was a great success, I was asked if I would be willing to go to Saginaw and be interviewed on TV-5 news at noon. I said I would and I was sent a list of the questions I would be asked on air. Great! I could be prepared.

A man I knew from Dow heard about this, came into my office and said, "Duane, just be prepared for some lowball questions. When we were trained at Dow for press briefings we were warned that reporters most often times will not ask you the questions they submit to you but will try to knock you off balance by asking questions designed to trip you up." Great, I thought, why did I agree to do this? I thought this was just about sharing something good God was doing with more people.

So on the appointed day I went to the studio, was nervous as could be. I was directed to the seat next to the young woman who was on air that day and then "three, two, one" we were on the air. The woman described our program for the audience and then turned to me. The first question wasn't on the sheet of submitted questions, but it wasn't hard to answer. But then came the second and the third, none of which were on the sheet, and one of the questions was clearly designed to discredit. She said something about Midland having lots of resources and why were we doing this in a place known to have so many resources? Why not somewhere else where there are greater needs? Thanks to my friend's warning I was ready for that question and had done some research and informed her using statistics from

the Department of Social Services that the City of Midland itself has a lot of resources and programs but as a county there were a lot of needs. The perception was inaccurate when it came to the county. Clearly she was trying to trip me up with unscripted, challenging questions, and I couldn't wait to get out of there and never do that again.

The Pharisees were trying to trip Jesus up by asking their question. But he sees through it as he always did. What he gives them is scriptural for both groups, the Sadducees who only held the Torah—the first five books of our Bible—as authoritative and the Pharisees who expanded their scripture by including the prophets and the writings. He gave them Deuteronomy 6:5:

⁵ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

And then he added Leviticus 19:18:

¹⁸ You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

The reading from Deuteronomy was known as the *shema* and it was central to the Pharisees' religious practice. It was written on small scrolls, rolled up and placed in a box called a mezuzah and attached to their door posts so that every time they entered their homes they were reminded to love God above all and with all. Jesus was affirming one of their deeply held convictions and if he'd stopped there it might have been easier. Being spiritual by loving God one-on-one, that's not so hard. But then Jesus added the second part: love your neighbor as yourself. So much for easy spirituality with no religion. I appreciate how one pastor put it:

The people who say they are spiritual but not religious have spoken more truth than they realize. "Spirit" is formless, wispy, barely there. It is so indistinct and disembodied that one doesn't really have to deal with it. It is more feeling and impression than anything else. On the other hand, the root of "religious" is "ligare" which is also the French root of ligament. You can't get much more earthy than that. "Ligare" means to tie to or to tie back. Ligaments connect muscle to the bone; religion ties us to God and one another.

Those who seek to be spiritual without being religious believe they can float free of the ties that bind, feel good about God and be confident that God feels good about them. A willingness to be religious indicates an awareness that an amorphous, spiritual Godlikeness would not have plunged interferingly into the midst of our pain and suffering. Rather, it took a God of compassion to, quite mysteriously and inexplicably, give up whatever it means to be divine and plunge headlong into the muck of our lives.

God in Christ took on ligaments and sinews and walked among us and suffered among us and died among us and with us and for us. God in Christ was raised from the dead and draws us together, ties us together, as the Body of Christ, held together by ligaments of love and sinews of service. And we, the tied together Body of Christ in the world, are called to the task of loving God, most especially by loving our neighbors and enemies in God's stead and in God's

name.

So Jesus challenges us, too, as we overhear this interaction with the Pharisees to recognize that in loving neighbors—even those —or maybe especially those!—who make us feel uncomfortable we are loving God and that in loving God we can't help but love our neighbors.

One more story. Some of you no doubt know the name, Stephen Covey. One of his seven habits of highly effective people, is “Be Proactive”. People who take responsibility for their own lives, he says, are those who live proactively. Covey was teaching this habit at a seminar. A man came up to him at a break and said to him:

“Stephen, I like what you're saying. But every situation is so different. Look at my marriage. I'm really worried. My wife and I just don't have the same feelings for each other we used to have. I guess I just don't love her anymore and she doesn't love me. What can I do?”

“The feeling isn't there anymore?” he asked.

“That's right,” he affirmed. “And we have three children we're really concerned about. What do you suggest?”

“Love her,” I replied.

“I told you, the feeling just isn't there anymore.”

“Love her.”

“You don't understand. That feeling of love just isn't there.”

“Then love her. If the feeling isn't there, that's a good reason to love her.”

“But how can you love when you don't love?”

“My friend, love is a verb. Love-the feeling-is a fruit of love, the verb. So love her. Serve her. Sacrifice. Listen to her. Empathize. Appreciate. Affirm her. Are you willing to do that?” (Pp. 79-80)

When we love actively it changes not only relationships but the world which is why I imagine Jesus, when asked what's the bottom line with all the religious rules, gave us this one: Love God and neighbor actively, so it shows and can be seen by another. When we are able to do that—when are able to be that--the world is transformed and so are we.