

To Those Who Are Serious About Their Faith
Matthew 6:1-8, 16-21
First Presbyterian Church
September 26, 2021

Introduction to the Reading

Now here's a fun fact to impress your friends with at your next dinner party. Back in 1897, Vilfredo Pareto, an Italian economist, observed that 20% of pea pods in his garden produced 80% of the peas. (20% of his pea pods produced 80% of the peas). Well, thinking he may be onto something, Mr. Pareto applied the same logic to land distribution in Italy and found that 80% of the land was owned by 20% of the population. Then others began to notice the same thing – economists noticed that 80% of sales are produced by 20% of a company's products or services... and 80% of your success comes from 20% of your ideas... and finally, 80% of complaints are made by 20% of customers.

By now, of course, you know what I'm talking about... I'm talking about the 80-20 rule, also known as the Pareto Principle, which states that a minority of causes, inputs, or efforts usually lead to a majority of the results, outputs, or rewards.

Now, in the church world we talk about 80% of the work being done by 20% of the people... 80% of the funding coming from 20% of the donors... 80% of the church's results, outputs, or rewards are the result of the causes, inputs, and efforts of 20% of the members.

This morning's sermon is for those of you who are in that 20% category- which I know is most of you here this morning. This is a sermon for those of you who are seriously committed... for those of you who take your religion very seriously. You must know how much the church relies on you... you who are disciples not in word alone, but in deed as well... we count on your generous giving... we depend on your leadership on session and committees. Others may drop in on Sunday morning, but you are here for Bible study on Tuesday night, you help in the kitchen Wednesday afternoon, you were at the Habitat worksite all bright and bushytailed yesterday morning, and here you are back again this morning for worship. You are the 20% of this church... if it were not for you, this church would not be what it is today.

But here's the thing about you 20 percenters –
so much do we love you...
so much do we count on you...
so much do we admire you...

that we may forget the special religious temptation that may lure you away from God.¹

It's not hard to imagine others being tempted as we know, the world offers so many enticing substitutes.

¹ Patrick Wilson in his Homiletical Perspective essay on this text, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 2, Lent through Eastertide. p. 21.

But you 20% - you're just so dedicated, so disciplined, so generous - you're just such good people that your temptation is not so obvious. Well, leave it to Jesus, right? Leave it to Jesus to have something to say to us 20 percenters.

Gospel Reading

“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. 2“So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 3But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

5“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 6But whenever you pray, go into your room, and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. 7“When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. 8Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

16“And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 17But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 18so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Sermon

The temptation for us 20 percenters is to substitute “religious practice” for God... to mistake the road map for the destination... to make the means the end. God gives us opportunities to be generous, to pray, to fast... and to do many other holy things... all so we can draw near to God. Our temptation... and sometimes our sin... is to turn these holy practices into performances... to substitute human attention for God's approval.

Here in this section of the Sermon, I have to admit, Jesus gets a little irreverent, because he parodies those who take their religion seriously. Here come the almsgivers into the courts of God, accompanied by the brass section of the local symphony. They give a few dollars here and the trumpets fanfare... another few dollars there and the trombones salute. And everybody watching thinks, “My, my, they sure are generous!” but Jesus says, “Truly I tell you; they have received their reward.”

Over there stand some people praying. You know they are praying because people blocks away can hear that they are praying... and their words go on and on, always stretching for one more ounce of emotion... one more flowery phrase. People listening may say, “My, my, they certainly pray well.” But Jesus says, “Truly I tell you; they have received their reward.”

And then, here come people who are fasting. You know they are fasting from their gaunt faces and mussed hair and torn garments. The problem with fasting is that no one can see that you aren't eating... and what's the good of that? So, these folks put on their weak, sad faces to show how hungry they are, and people say, "My, my, they certainly are religious, aren't they?" But Jesus says, "Truly I tell you; they have received their reward."

Of course, Jesus had no way of knowing that we Presbyterians are normally a very reserved lot – shunning all forms of ostentation and loathe to draw attention to ourselves. So naturally we would never dream of hiring a brass band on pledge dedication Sunday... and most of us so uncomfortable praying out loud there's no chance we would go on and on... and though we may diet to lose some weight after the holidays, we really aren't much into fasting.

Yet, playing the Presbyterian card only that misses Jesus' point that whatever it is we do to express our faith (whether it is giving or praying or fasting or serving or studying or singing) whatever we do to express our faith must be done ONLY for God. In other words, if we are putting our faith into action in a way that can be seen by others – whether it's being seen leaving your house every Sunday for worship or hammering nails on a Habitat house or praying a blessing before you eat at Backstreet's... if we are practicing our piety in a way that can be seen, it matters to Jesus who we want to see. And what Jesus is saying is that his followers should practice their piety... they should walk their talk... they should go about their devotion as if no one sees but God.

Which, of course, is the purpose! It's the purpose of all our piety – it's the purpose of worship... the purpose of giving... the purpose of prayer... the purpose of fasting – to draw us closer to God. That is what we TRULY hunger for... we have this hunger for God. St. Augustine knew about it praying, "O Lord, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." We long to speak to God, to hear God's voice, to feel God's presence... and sometimes we do... sometimes we really do! But following Jesus is more like a marathon than a sprint... and our longing for God takes place over years and decades... and sometimes we grow weary and are tempted to give up and just settle for being religious... settle for the recognition our being among the 20% may bring us. Jesus promises that the REAL rewards... the REAL goodies... will come to those who give themselves away in almsgiving... those who shed all pretense in prayer... and those who empty themselves to be filled with God's goodness.

Only a few verses ago, Jesus tells his disciples, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness..." In other words, truly blessed are those who hunger for God... they will be filled. God will indeed fill them. And that's all that matters.