

“What You See...”

Jeremiah 6:16-20; Matthew 23:1-12

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

September 4, 2016 – 16th Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald W. Botts

If you've been on computers since the early days you probably come remember the term WYSIWYG. It sounds pretty funny when you hear it said, but it actually stood for something very important in word processing. WYSIWYG: W-Y-S-I-W-Y-G. It meant "what you see is what you get."

In 1980's what appeared on a computer screen was merely a representation of what the computer was planning to do with what you typed in. Unlike today, the screen didn't show exactly how the page would look when it was finally printed out. The same thing applied to drawings and charts and other graphics. What you saw on the screen often wasn't how it would actually look.

Now with Microsoft Word, when you set up a page you know what it's going to ultimately look like. Representation and reality are one. What you see is what you get.

Today you could probably create a whole series of modern parables around computers. I even suspect that Jesus, if he had been born into the 21st century, might have referenced them in some of his teaching stories. He certainly would have used common examples from modern-day life to illustrate one particular theme of his: things are often not what they seem.

He might have told the story of a certain man who, some years ago, arrived early each day in Chicago's financial district. Every morning a shiny black limo would pull up to the curb in the middle of a block flanked by banks, insurance companies, and various investment houses. A man in conservative business attire would step out of the car with an expensive briefcase. His suit was impeccably tailored. It was clear to all nearby that this was an important man of means who was about to begin a day of significant work.

Each morning he nodded graciously to passersby as he made his way down the street and into one of the mammoth buildings in the Loop. His whole arrival and appearance left little doubt of his station in life as he entered the impressive bronze doors.

Each day he strode through the building's marble lobby and picked up a paper at the newsstand, always leaving a nice tip for the seller. Then he went past the elevators and out of the lobby through a small rear door to cross the alley and into the delivery entrance of another building.

Immediately he went down a short stairway and unlocked a door. Once inside the room he took off that fine suit and carefully hung it on a hanger. From a hook at the side of the cubicle he took down a brown gabardine shirt and pants and put them on. From a corner he took a bucket and mop and went upstairs where he would work for the next eight hours, stopping only for an apple at lunch and reading the newspaper he bought earlier.

At five each evening he would reverse his morning ritual, dressing again as if he had just stepped out of a board room. He left the second office building and re-entered the back entry

of the first one, past the bank of elevators into the marble lobby, and then back on the street. He greeted people and they greeted him until he came to a waiting limo parked mid-block, whereupon he got into the car and it sped away into the Chicago night.

The few who discovered his daily change-over never found out the secret behind the man. Was he a rich eccentric who, for some reason, wanted to be just an average Joe who earned his living by honest toil? Was he a fellow who so wished to overcome the restraints of his routine life that he scrimped and saved so that, twice a day, he could be a somebody, a person of importance? No one, apparently, ever solved the mystery.

"Be aware," Jesus might have said, "for things aren't always what they seem on the surface. Beware of making judgments based on incomplete evidence."

Now our text for today from Matthew echoes some of that same concern. Here Jesus holds up the Pharisees, not because of what they say, but for the manner in which they live. They do not practice what it is they teach. He said, "They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to move them." Which is to say, the Pharisees were quick to put moral obligations on others, but unwilling to keep them themselves.

"They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long." Phylacteries were the little leather boxes worn on the left forearm by Jews which contained texts from the Old Testament. The fringe referred to here were the blue twisted threads at the four corners of male garments, worn as a reminder to obey God's commandments.

Jesus criticizes the Pharisees for making a show of their piety by wearing large scripture bands and longer than average fringe. By so doing they seemed to be calling attention to their religious devotion, but their claim was hollow. The same could be said of their fancy robes and their delight in titles. Said Jesus, "They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogue, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplace, and to have people call them rabbi." The Pharisees which Jesus cited here and elsewhere were making a pretense of their faith. What you saw was not what you got.

Hypocrisy was not something Jesus could condone. He chastised the smugness by which some seemingly religious people elevated themselves by putting others down. When they chose to wear the biggest phylacteries, the Pharisees here literally wore their religion on their sleeves. But there it stayed, and never became something of the heart. It wasn't authentic; it wasn't real.

Does it seem like Jesus expects a lot from us? Well, I guess he does. I don't think most of us strut our religion before others in the manner of these Pharisees; yet at times we're all somewhat hypocritical when it comes to living out what we say we believe.

When we're asked to take on a special responsibility in the life of the congregation, we may ask ourselves "Who am I to do this? I know my failings. I recognize my sins. I acknowledge my many times of unfaithfulness. I am unworthy of the trust put in me." We understand that the man or woman that others know us to be, may not always be the person inside.

This also reflects the misgivings that we may sometimes have when we come to worship. We think, "Who am I to be sitting here in this sanctuary. Who am I kidding? Surely not God, and probably no one else here who really knows me. My worthiness is a sham. I am a hypocrite in this hour, in this place."

Who hasn't had those feelings from time to time? We often don't come up to the standards we feel are right. We know we are far from being perfect. If tickets to this sanctuary were sold on merit, most of us would be standing in the back. Some of us might just get to look in the door, or so we may think.

You see, though, when we realize our failings and admit them and wish to work at doing better, then I believe we are in the right place when we're here. I think we're those whom Jesus came to save from ourselves, to do for us what we would be ultimately unable to do. It is God's grace that gives us a place in this house, that forgives us when we sin, that comforts us when we fail. God's love here opens closed doors and, through undeserved generosity, gives us each other.

Well, if we are not to make a show of our religion and covet the envy of others, then how should we act? Again we need to hear Jesus. "The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted."

The person of faith is one who knows her limits. The person of faith realizes his imperfections and truly wants to be helpful to others. Religion is understood not to be a show, church membership not something on a resume. A humble knowledge of oneself and service to others | are really the basic hallmarks of Christian living.

The good news from the Gospels is that we can be who we are, with all the blemishes we have, with all the mistakes we make. God accepts us for who we are when we come with humility and a desire to make amends for our wrongs. We are allowed to be our true selves before God and before each other.

You see we're called to be people who stand with authenticity, who say by our words and through our actions: what you see is what you get. Not perfection on two feet, but real persons attempting to do our best, giving from our heart to serve others. That, says Jesus, is the kind of life that is pleasing to God.