

“Motive and Intent”

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Texts: Luke 6: 27-36 and Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-21

There is a lot in our scripture from Matthew today that can be confusing. We know it's about giving and not being hypocrites, etc., but at the same time, we look at the communion table this morning and see school supplies everywhere. Are we going against what Jesus said? Should we never have anyone see our name on our envelope, or even know that we give to the church? Should we never get thanked when we donate something special to the church? What is faithful? What are we going to do? It gets even more confusing when Jesus just got done saying in Matthew 5 that we should let our light shine! Often, when people get confused about scripture, they just ignore the whole thing. I'd suggest that we dig deeper in order to find out what Jesus is really trying to tell us and then deciding how best to be faithful. In the end, I think we'll learn today that it all is about motive and intent. Let's investigate...

To get there, we are going to learn about a tree that you may or may not know about. This tree is called the yagrumo, sometimes called the “trumpet tree.” It is found in Puerto Rico, and its leaves are quite remarkable, according to the description from Rev. Daphne Gascot Arias. One side [of the leaves] is deep green; the other, a shining silver-white that catches the light. People say you can predict rain when you see the silver side showing because the leaves flip over just before the rainfall. It's as if the tree itself sense the change

in the air. It has un barrunto (a hunch) that something life-giving is on the way. It has the “inside scoop,” meteorologically speaking.

The yagrumo carries another, more sinister meaning in Puerto Rican culture. If you say that someone is “like the leaves of the yagrumo,” you are calling them two-faced. One is their public-performing face, the other reveals the inside, that is, what they’re really like. That contrast, between deep green and the shimmering silver, has become a symbol of hypocrisy, of pretending to be something we are not.

Arias goes on to describe the altar during Holy Week, where the cross was often draped with yagrumo leaves. The silver sides of the leaves would turn upward and outward. The cruciform arrangement shimmered under the sunlight piercing through the windows of the sanctuary. “As a little kid,” she relates, “I would speculate on how these ‘two-faced’ leaves (often alluded to when calling someone a hypocrite) symbolized, ironically, the good news of the Resurrection. Only later did I realize that symbols are multilayered, complex, and malleable. The same leaves that alluded to hypocrisy could also represent the transformation and new life that comes from opening ourselves to the light. Further, “what we are accentuating is that the leaves turn not to deceive, but to receive. They turn toward the heavens to receive in expectation of rain, of life, of abundance.”

In short, the yagrumo has two faces: one that looks inward, toward the hidden place of the heart where our trust in God resides, and another that faces outward, yielding the fruit of love, justice, and compassion. These are not opposing faces. They are complementary: two sides of the same calling.

That leads us back into the story from Matthew's Gospel. Jesus' command to "give 'in secret' challenges us. This is especially true as we see the communion table covered with school supplies that will go to the after-school program here in Gaylord next week. Did we miss the message on giving in secret? Why should these gifts be "on display"? We could do it some other week, but why this one? Should we "let our light shine" or "give in secret"? The first step to deeper faith is asking questions and trying to make sense of it all. Far too many people just take what they are told, or they "chuck the whole thing" because scripture is at odds. Well, some scriptures are at odds. The two I'm referring to? Not so much.

It is believed that in Matthew 5 when Jesus directs us to "let our light shine" that this is directed to the community. Remember, it's literally a part of the "Sermon on the Mount," which, by nature, is directed to a whole community. This scripture, by contrast, is likely given to individuals. It is one thing for the community to celebrate their gifts shared with the world, and for individuals it's different. Dr. R.A. Hare in his commentary on this passage puts it this way: Since individuals may be tempted to glorify God by letting their good deeds be visible, it is better to let the community accept responsibility. You may have noticed that there are no labels up here to indicate who gave which school supplies. While that is not the worst thing, you can imagine that if people wanted their name attached, then maybe they would be looking for public accolades for their gifts. This is something Jesus warns us against.

However, it's not that simple. Were it that simple, we would have to produce even more ways to keep your gift secret. Maybe you'd have to drop your church tithe off in an

unmarked box after midnight! Of course, that doesn't make sense, either. In fact, it is good that our children and grandchildren watch us give gifts to the church and to those in need. It's important that they see our faith in action. This isn't so they'll tell the world how wonderful you and I are, but so that they will see that one way we put faith into action is by our giving. So maybe the issue is not visibility, but motive and intent?

Rev. Arias puts it this way, "When we give to the poor, or fast, the measure of our generosity is not how others might react, much less how others might praise our charity. It's how closely our hearts align with God's own generosity. The question is not whether the act is public or private, but whether our hearts remain open to the One who sees in secret, whether our silvery, intimate heart turns toward the divine light." Six times in our passage, Jesus uses the word "secret." "The secret place is less about hiding; rather, it denotes the sacred space of intimacy. It is our receptive, true selves, where we are not malnourished by the public spotlight of performance, but by the resurrecting light of God. ***The place of intimacy is the silver light-receiving side of ourselves (emphasis mine).*** Another way to put it is, "Generosity, prayer, and fasting all find their root in that same intimacy. The strength to give freely, without fanfare or fear, comes from that hidden communion with God."

Look at the contrast of Jesus' message with that of society. So much of our society is "look at me!" Of course, some do this more than others, but strangely enough it's often Christians who seek the most attention from and within our culture. "But the economy of the kingdom of God has a different set of strategies and metrics: one that values intimate faithfulness over public approval. This is not secrecy to deceive; it is an intimacy to receive,

and intimacy born of trust in God. To live generously is to trust that what is done in secret is seen by God, and that God's seeing is enough."

The lessons are very similar in our passage to speaking of fasting. Without going into all that we might say about fasting, let me again use the metaphor of the yagrumo tree.

"The yagrumo leaf shines only because it reflects the sun; like the moon at night, it has not light of its own. Remember, the yagrumo tree does not produce two separate and distinct leaves, one green and one silver. It is one integrated, multicolored leaf, and both sides, green and silver, benefit from the light." We too are called to reflect God in all the faith practices we engage. Even the light we shine as community, should be our reflection of God shining on, in and through us—reflecting off of us into a world in desperate need of light.

I don't know about you, but I learned a lot from the story of one Puerto Rican tree that I believe applies to much about what Christian faith is all about. Yes, we are beginning our series on generosity in preparation for our Stewardship Campaign. Yes, the theme this year is "Where your heart is..." Notice it doesn't finish the sentence like many of us want to do. Because it's not only treasure that shows where our heart is, but a lot of our faith actions (or inaction) show the same thing. Further, we are complicated beings just like the yagrumo tree is complicated. Even more striking, the same leaf that can make one be thought of as "two-faced" also can be the leaf magnifying the message of the resurrection. Where humans always over-simplify things and classify them as "either/or," God continues to remind us that almost all of the created world—check that—all of the created world, is "both/and."

There's a lot to learn from the leaves of only one tree. I wonder what would happen to our faith if we began to take lessons from more of God's creation? Maybe the same lessons would lead us to understand that humans are like the whole rest of creation. We are at once simple and beautiful, and at the same time complicated and not always as beautiful. And yet, it all belongs. Maybe "keep it simple, stupid" is not always the best advice. This is especially true of our faith, our love of God, and our love for one another.

If nothing else, may we learn today that motive and intent are far more important than our individual actions. And when we can figure out motive and intent, we can learn a whole lot more about one another, about God, and about the world God created. May we begin by challenging our own motives and intents---whether it's in our giving, or whatever else we're involved in. What truly is our motive? As often as is humanly possible, may that motive be love. More on that next week!

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.