

“No Room for Show Business!”

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Text: Matthew 6: 1-18

Eugene Peterson has written a translation of the Bible that attempts to make our scripture more accessible by writing it in today's language. For this scripture, I think he hit the nail on the head by translating Matthew 6:1 in this way: “Be careful when you are trying to be good so that you don't make a performance out of it. It might be good theater, but the God who made you won't be applauding.” In several places in this scripture, Peterson reminds us that what we do as people of faith is not for show, or applause, or public accolades, but is for the benefit of God and the world. There isn't room for show business!

That doesn't mean that those who have dramatic outbursts, or those who perform plays or other shows are somehow bad. Nor does it mean that you should never do something that is demonstrative of your faith. That would be a complete misreading. In many faith traditions, there are vocal outbursts, dancing, the use of arts, hand clapping, drum beating...you name it! But the purpose of making the “joyful noise” is not so that everyone applauds us, but because what

we do as people of faith in worship, prayer life, service is to glorify God. It's not about "look at me!" In fact, much of our faith is about us looking into ourselves and let the results speak for themselves. Brian McLaren, in Chapter 29 of his book *We Make the Road By Walking says it this way*, "The key concept, according to Jesus, is the opposite of what we might expect: If you want to see change in the outside world, the first step is to withdraw into your inner world. Connect with God in secret, and the results will occur "openly".

This chapter in Matthew's Gospel is about doing a lot of things in secret: giving, praying, and fasting. All of those are tremendously good faith practices, but they are not opportunities to show everyone how great we are. There were many occasions in the New Testament when Jesus went off by himself to pray. It's not that we can't pray in public – in fact, we ought to – it is the "showing off" nature. McLaren reminds us, "to be more holy or spiritual in private than we appear in public."

We also don't need to show off by telling people how much we give. McLaren says that it's ironic that people do all kinds of "ugly things" in private – lie, steal, cheat, and so on. Jesus wants us to "plot goodness in secret". He wants us even to do good and beautiful things without getting caught. I remember as kids

leaving May flowers, or May baskets on a neighbor's doorstep, ringing the doorbell and running to hide so that when the neighbor came to the door, they wouldn't see who gave them the flowers. The best look was the look on their face when receiving a surprise. A good use of social media is people being thankful that "a stranger" paid for their lunch or something. Many times, when people give, they want their names all over it. I learned doing philanthropy work that this is simply reality. People give large sums to have a room named after them. That's okay I guess, but an even better gift is one that is given without needing the whole world to know who gave it. Jesus invites us to "do good things and don't get caught".

Same comes with prayer. McLaren says this beautifully, "Prayer can either strengthen your soul in private or raise your profile in public, but not both." He even tells us how to pray, but before going into that, there isn't really a wrong way to pray, but it's checking our motives. Do we just pray because we see God as the great giver in the sky that if we say the right words God will shower gifts on us, but if we don't get something, we prayed wrong? That doesn't make sense, but many of us believe it. God knows what you need before you ever ask for it. Does that mean we shouldn't pray for people? Well, no, but God doesn't give out healings based on who got the most prayers. God's grace is not popularity

contest! We pray for people knowing that God understands, but we also use our prayer list to let one another know who has something to celebrate, or who is having a rough time. Believe me, God wants the best for you and God loves you. That is not dependent upon how often or how well you pray. Praying does something for us by connecting our heart, mind and soul with God and doing as much listening as we do speaking. Silent prayer is powerful as it allows us to hear the still, small voice of God. An attitude of prayer, whatever that means to you, is orienting ourselves to what God might have to say about our lives. But please don't misunderstand...it's not that we cannot publicly pray, that would be silly...it is about whether or not we are trying to impress people with our big words and fancy thoughts.

God's mercy and God's care come to us all. Prayer helps us recognize that fact.

McLaren outlines four simple, but profound moves in prayer:

- 1) We orient ourselves to God. That can be done a variety of ways. I've learned contemplative prayer, but there are many other kinds of prayers that allow us to calm the world around us and orient our whole selves to God. "We acknowledge God," says McLaren, "as the loving parent whose

infinite embrace puts us in a family relationship with all people and with all of creation.” God as a mystery that no words could ever contain.

- 2) We align our desire with God’s greatest desire. In our scripture for this week, we pray, “Thy Kingdom come, Thy Will be done”. We also pray: “On earth as it is in heaven”. Eugene Peterson says it this way in his translation: Set the world right; Do what’s best – as above, so below.” We want the world to be, “the kind of place where God’s dreams come true.”
- 3) We bring to God our needs and concerns -- for physical as well as social and spiritual needs. I would add that we also listen for the response. So often our praying is us heaping up a bunch of words and phrases that are so thought out or formulaic. Really, as I learned from a spiritual choir I sang in long ago: Just a little talk with Jesus makes it right. But it’s a conversation, where sometimes we speak, and often we’re called to listen.
- 4) Finally, we prepare ourselves for the public world into which we will soon re-enter. “Lead us not into temptation. Deliver us from evil.” Peterson translates this as, “Keep us safe from ourselves and the Devil.” Sometimes we can be the ones who do the most harm to ourselves.

I really want to talk more about prayer, but if you walk away with the idea that prayer is as much (or more?) listening as it is speaking, we'll have gone a long way.

Lent is a time when we want to examine our faith. As we talked about last week, people like to give up something for Lent. But this, too, I'm afraid, is not something for public consumption. "Look at me, I gave this up!" isn't quite what Jesus is looking for. Now if you told people, don't freak out! But it's even a greater discipline to take on a project, or to give something up in honor of Lent and keep that to yourself. See if the world notices! It can become a game! That can be fun. Work on inner change and growth and see if anyone notices without your asking. We live in a "look at me!" world where much of what we do, we do for show. Social media helps that along. Sharing our experiences is great but spending a lot of time showing the world how faithful and religious we are, I think, is the opposite of what Jesus calls for. We worry so much about our public selves. Jesus, however, is much more concerned with our private selves.

McLaren ends this chapter in this way:

The world won't change unless we change, and we won't change unless we pull away from the world's games and pressures. In secrecy, in solitude, in God's presence, a new aliveness can, like a seed, begin to take root. And if

that life takes root in us, we can be sure it will bear fruit through us...fruit that can change the world.

God is so interested in you and wants to get to know you more. Your spirituality is what its all about. Not your performance, but your Spirit: mind, body, and soul. When you pray, when you give, when you fast, do it for your growth, not to impress God or other people. Be honest. Be vulnerable. Be open. A changed person, whose spirit is right and whole and good, can't help but change the world for good.

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.