

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C: “Real” Christians

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For a little over a year and a half, my wife, Sarah, and I have made our home on the far southside of Milwaukee in a little pocket of the city sandwiched in-between Greenfield and West Allis. Coming from the southside, I quickly found that heading up 94/43 tends to be the easiest route to church here at St. Mark’s, and over the last 19 months you can imagine how familiar I’ve become not only with this route but with the scenery along the way as well. I’ve become so familiar, in fact, with that scenery that I tend to notice a few changes here or there: construction, new businesses, even new billboards.

There has been one such billboard that has been particularly catching my eye lately. Perhaps you’ve seen it. I can’t tell you just how many times I’ve seen this billboard, but what I can tell you is that I cringe a bit in my seat every time I do.

At the 314th mile along 94/43, there is a billboard that reads, “Real Christians Obey Jesus’ Teachings.” At face value, there might not seem to be anything wrong with this phrase. As Christians (literally “little Christs”), we have been striving to walk in Jesus’ footsteps and follow his teachings for millennia, so the phrase doesn’t exactly say anything untrue, yet my issue is not with what this phrase says but with what it implies.

Because you see, if I am a “Real Christian” because I obey Christ’s teachings, then it necessarily follows that if you fall short of obeying these teachings, then you are not, in fact, a “Real Christian.” The implication of this phrase becomes then “I’m a Real Christian and you’re not” or even “I’m better than you.”

I don’t think this is an implication that’s particularly foreign in today’s world. These days — and I have to admit I can be guilty of this myself — I hear plenty of conversations where the parties involved end up pedestalizing their communities or even themselves: essentially saying, “I’m right and you’re wrong. I’m good and you’re evil. I’m better than you.”

It’s an implication that was no more foreign to Jesus or to those who heard his parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. In prayer, the Pharisee offers thanksgiving to God not for anything God has done for him (or for anybody else for that matter) but in thanksgiving for how great he believes himself to be in comparison to whomever he considers lesser than himself.

Like our billboard along 94/43, the Pharisee might not seem to be saying anything untrue in this prayer: self-centered as it may be. By the religious standards of second-temple Jerusalem, the Pharisee checks all the corresponding boxes of righteousness: a strict observant of his faith and even a tither! The Pharisee even tells the truth when he states the difference between himself and others like the Tax Collector... but the difference between them is not what he imagines.

The Pharisee sees the Tax Collector only for what the Tax Collector himself claims to be: a sinner. However, while caught up in his self-righteousness prayer, the Pharisee doesn't recognize the ways in which he too falls short of righteousness. The Pharisee doesn't recognize that — like the Tax Collector, like thieves, like rogues, like adulterers — he too is a sinner. We all are. We have all fallen short of righteousness at some point and I'm sure will again; it's part of what it means to be human. The true difference between the Pharisee and the Tax Collector is that the Tax Collector knows he is a sinner and throws himself penitently at the mercy of a loving God while the Pharisee reflects joyfully inward and then upward on his self-imposed pedestal of false perfection. And, he's not alone in doing so.

It can be so easy to fall into this pharisaic trap. When confronted with another human being with whom I have differences, it can be so easy to convince myself of the delusion that I am somehow a better person than they are, and the deeper the differences run the easier it becomes to believe the delusion. Maybe you've experienced this yourself and maybe it doesn't always sound like "I'm better than you." Sometimes it can sound closer to, "I'm smarter than you," "I have more money than you," "I'm healthier than you," "I'm younger than you," "I'm more woke than you," "I have myself more put together than you," or even "I'm a 'Real Christian.'" It can be so easy to place ourselves on a pedestal and look down at the others around us. The problem is that when we do this we end up tricking ourselves into forgetting the ways in which we too are imperfect, the things about ourselves that we are all working on, the spaces along the journey of faith that we each find ourselves on.

Like our spiritual ancestors, we are all doing our best to follow in Jesus' footsteps, doing our best to obey Jesus' teachings. And, like those same spiritual ancestors, we all fall short from time to time; it's inevitable that we will but doing so doesn't make us "fake Christians" or any less Christian. In fact, continuing to try and try and try again to follow a perfect God in the face of our own imperfection is precisely what continues to make us Christian. And so the — perhaps more accurate — statement I would prefer to see on a billboard is "Christians *try obeying* Jesus' teachings."

So let us try. Let us try our best to follow in Christ's footsteps... and when one of us falls short of that path, when one of us is so humbled, may we — remembering that we are no better or worse than them and remembering the ways we too have fallen short and we too have been humbled—lovingly and compassionately exalt them up again. Amen.