

EVERYTHING IS CURRICULUM

FEBRUARY 9, 2020 SERMON

Matthew 23:25-26: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean."

You know that feeling you get when a police car comes up behind you? And stays behind you? We've never been better at following traffic laws than in those moments.

On one of my first ride-alongs with a police officer, we passed a nice car going the opposite direction. We made a quick u-turn and followed the car. Up the road, through turns, down the same road again. Our easy conversation ground to a halt. The officer was alert, following, watching. I asked the police officer why we were following this particular car when the tags were good, the car was in good shape, the driver didn't seem to be breaking any laws. The officer said, "That car is wrong. It's wrong for the man driving it. No young Black man drives a car like that in this town. So what's he doing?"

When I found my tongue again, I said, "Maybe he's from out of town."

The police officer asked me what I thought this man might be doing in town. It then switched from following to pursuit. The driver knew we were going wherever he went, and he began trying to avoid us. From my perspective, not a terrible idea. From the police officer's perspective, this was a sign of guilt. We caught up with him on commercial property. I stayed in the car and watched. They had a conversation. He was run through the system. The police officer looked in his vehicle, including the trunk. Nothing happened except that the driver probably never wanted to come visit his aunt again. The police officer got back in the car.

But before we pulled away, he pulled a pad out of the door of his car and started filling out a form.

"What's that?" I asked.

"The Vehicle Stop Report. Sometimes I forget, but I better fill it out after this stop. It's a racial profiling form. We have to file these with the state."

I knew why the state would police departments to fill out those forms. The state's collected this data for 20 years now, to combat racial profiling, which is people being stopped or arrested because of their race. I really wanted to know how he was going to justify the stop on the form. Like, was he going to say he pulled him over because he was young, black, driving a nice car, and didn't want to be tailed by the police for more than five minutes? So I just asked, "Why do you have to fill out the form?"

The officer said, "So we can build better racial profiles."

Nope. Very carefully, I told the police officer that I was 100% sure "building better racial profiles" was NOT why the state had them fill out the form. He disagreed. By the end of the ride along, he felt like I had learned a lot from my ride-along.

Oh, I learned a lot that day. Everything is curriculum.

Curriculum is the stuff we buy from Cokesbury or whoever to teach in our Sunday School classes. Curriculum are the books kids learn from in school. It is the formal stuff we buy or borrow or write to teach lessons.

But I am reminded as I teach this group of confirmands that they have learned much more than the curriculum we bought them. They also learned from sermons, from Fellowship times, from the parking lot, from the ride home from church. They learned from CrossTraining, from Social Studies at school, from conversations at home and conversations they overheard anywhere. Kids are sponges. They soak up everything. I keep telling them that they know more than they think they know, and confirmation is just about putting it all together and seeing if it works for them. And sometimes, I watch them struggle as we start putting it all together — in part because what they learned at church and what they're learning out in the world as teens — those things don't mesh.

Jesus is talking to religious people in Matthew 23. He's nearing the end of his life and ministry, and he's not backing down from the work

that needs to be done with the religious people of his day. He's basically accusing them of hypocrisy, of doing one thing when people are watching and another when people aren't, of being worried about the outside but not the inside.

Now this passage may just seem like a really angry rant at a group of "other people" to us today, but this is a crucial passage of the Bible to church people today. To get at why it is so important, we need to know who the Pharisees were in their own time and we need to know how people today may fall into the same patterns the Pharisees did in Jesus' day.

The Pharisees were the keepers of the law. These were men who spent their lives studying the first five books of the Old Testament and interpreting for the people what these laws meant. If you had a question about scripture in Jesus' day, you asked a Pharisee. And when you asked them a question, you usually didn't get a straight answer, but rather a story.

And that should sound familiar. When people asked Jesus questions, they seldom got a straight answer, but, rather, stories. Jesus was a storyteller who relied on parables to explain scriptural content while confusing his hearers. This is probably because Jesus was trained by Pharisees. After all, he is called "Rabbi" or teacher by his followers, which was what Pharisees were called.

So if Jesus was trained by Pharisees, why was he so hard on them? Because they were worried about people following the rules and appearing righteous. They were worried about the outside, not the inside.

The modern-day equivalent of a Pharisee would be a religious person who is obsessed with the rules. Christians can't do this. Christians can't do that. You can't do this, be this, say this, vote like this, and be a Christian. People get what they deserve. God is judging us for xyz. These are the words of a modern day Pharisee, someone who thinks that following God's way means following a set of rules to the letter but who ends up missing the spirit of God entirely. Says Jesus, woe to the Pharisees. "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of

the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.

Jesus would tell us it's not about how well you follow traffic laws when the police are behind you. It's about how well you drive when you think no one is watching.

Someone in the church shared stories this week of adults who changed their life as a child by steering their education. He said, "The little things, little comments, little actions, little life lessons. Those who don't know are making an impression but we remember forever." What we see of people when they think we're not watching — that's sometimes the stuff that sticks with us the most. They know what's real. You can't check a box and call it good around a kid. They can smell hypocrisy, and they know when we're being true. It's one of my favorite things about kids.

Everything is curriculum. What we say, what we do, how we say it, how we do it. All of that teaches the children in our midst. If we roll our eyes at them, it teaches. If we hand them a homemade cookie, it teaches. If we support each other, it teaches. When we choose to spend time with each other, it teaches. When we say nice things about and to each other, it teaches. So we spend their childhood teaching them, when we think we are and when we don't think we are. And when they're in Confirmation, we tell them that the reason we did all these things is not because it made us look good, but because it flows from what's inside us — the love we share for God and for them. And we want it for them.

We live in a world that says to our kids and to us that we're not enough. We're not good enough. We're not smart enough. We're not pretty or handsome enough. And we serve a God who says, through the beauty of creation — "I made this for you," who gives us partners for our journey so that we are not alone. We serve a God who sent God's only son so that we would hear that it is what is inside that matters, who died on a cross and rose from the grave so we would know that we are absolutely enough for God. Enough that God made

us enough through Jesus Christ. Enough for great sacrifice. Enough for great love. Enough was enough! Religion had become hypocrisy and legalism and rules and fingers pointing and reports filed — but what was inside, what action was flowing from, the heart — it wasn't good. And God wanted that to change.

So God sent Jesus whose whole curriculum is love. Everything love. The words of Jesus love. The communion table love. The cross and empty tomb love. The formation of the church love. This children's moment love. This sermon love. This pat on the back love. Everything is curriculum and the curriculum is love, so that in our religious practice flows from what is inside to the outside, from our heart to our hands.

To me, confirmation is about making sure the kids can put together all the things they've learned, or, if they haven't had a chance before, to learn the things that help them understand what being a disciple of Jesus really means so that they can choose it for themselves and become adults in the church. The thing is — it's all about what they choose to be the voice inside them. We want that voice to be "You are loved. You are enough." Because they're going to go out into the world, and it could get really hard. The world's curriculum makes people miserable. Jesus's curriculum makes people love.

That police officer — he was just following the rules, checking the boxes, doing what was required of him on the outside, but the inside — it wasn't what was supposed to be happening.

When I look in the faces of our middle and high school students, the gospel feels like a matter of life and death for me. Teaching confirmation is the scariest thing I do. Because I want to grab each kid and say "I need you to get this all the way to the core — everything we've done here, every cookie and smile and children's moment and Bible lesson and fun backyard activity — it was about love. I need you to get the curriculum, to know you're loved, to know you always have a place to come home to, that we will always, always, always love you and so will God. And please, let that be

the voice in your head, the steel in your spine, and the song in your heart.”

And that goes for you too. In all we do, in all we say, in how we do, and how we say, may we remember that everything is curriculum, and our curriculum is love. Amen.