

Practicing Piety

Matthew 5:13-16; 5:48-6:8

October 25, 2020

First Presbyterian, Luling

There are a lot of things I miss about the time before the pandemic. We've talked about those. But there's some things I resent. And one of those things is how the pandemic has shifted my focus to be internal, toward myself. I won't speak for you or anyone else, just myself. Because maybe you haven't been as tempted by this as I have. But I find myself constantly thinking "is it safe *for me* to go there or do that?" Is it safe for *my* kids? Is it a good idea for *our* family to get together or not? It can become all consuming, so that all I'm thinking about is what's best for me and mine.

Here's an example. The other night, Daisy and I were out for our evening walk. As we walked down the street, I saw an elderly neighbor out on his driveway, near the street. I've never met this neighbor, but I have seen him outside before, and he doesn't seem very stable on his feet. But there he was, a good 20 yards from his back door, with no walker or cane. I'll admit that I probably am more nosy than your average dog walking neighbor. As I approached, I thought, "well, I wonder if I should ask him if he needs a hand?" And then I had to think, "but I don't have a mask, and neither does he, and"—and here's the key, and this is really what I thought, and I share it as a confession—"what if he has covid?" I didn't think "what if I have covid and might infect him," but rather, I was focused on myself.

As I neared his driveway, his wife called out to him from the garage she was sweeping out, and I felt relieved that she could help him get back to the house. But after Daisy and I had passed their house, I heard her having to argue with him, and then I realized he must have some kind of dementia, because he was sure that he was going to catch a ride to town. She was equally sure that he needed to turn around and come back inside. So then I was worried about both of them, but still preoccupied with my lack of mask and potential for infection. Plus, I couldn't decide if they would be embarrassed if I said intervened, or annoyed, or thankful.

About five minutes later, when Daisy and I returned from the opposite direction, his wife had just convinced him to turn around and shuffle back toward the house. I kept an eye on them until she got him back in the house, and I guess if he had stepped into the street, I might have overcome my self-focus long enough to do something. But a year ago, I'm pretty sure I would have stopped and done what I could to help.

And I resent that covid has given me one more excuse to focus on myself, rather than on my neighbor—literally or figuratively speaking.

Our focus—whether it's on ourselves, or our neighbors, or God—is central to what Jesus is talking about in this next section of the sermon on the mount. He starts off with sort of a general comment about practicing your piety—it could just as easily say righteousness or justice—about practicing your piety before others. And then he gives three examples.

First, Jesus says, when you give alms, give to charity, don't make a big deal about it. Giving alms was required in Jewish law, as it is required in the Muslim faith, and certainly expected in our own. So *that* they would give alms wasn't a question; *how* they went about doing so was the question that Jesus is addressing. Jesus is saying, don't make a big deal of doing it, don't pat yourself on the back, don't announce it. Just do it quietly, as quietly as you

can. Then the one receiving the charity doesn't have unwanted attention or pity, and you don't draw attention to yourself. Focus on the God whose command you are following, not on yourself as you follow it.

Jesus's second example is quite similar, only it's about prayer. Prayer is a given, just like charitable donations. Of course Jesus is not saying don't pray. I don't think he's even saying don't ever pray in public. He does say to pray in private, because God hears in private just as well in public. And aren't we addressing God when we pray, anyway? What he most certainly is saying is to focus your prayers on the God to whom they are addressed, not toward building up yourself nor toward impressing those who might overhear your prayers or observe how often or when or where you pray. Again, it's a matter of focus.

The third example is similar but not exactly the same. When you pray, Jesus says, don't be making them long and fancy and heaping up empty phrases. I don't know about you, but I've heard some prayers that have heaps of empty phrases. Maybe even I've prayed some of them. It's not necessary, Jesus tells us. Again, it's a matter of focus. If you're focused on God and praying to God, rather than focused on other people who might be listening, then you can rest assured that God already knows what you need, God already hears your prayer, and God doesn't need to be impressed by your eloquent oratory.

Simply put. If you're doing your charity to impress your friends. If you're praying to make sure everyone knows you're praying. If you're fancying up your prayer for other people to admire you. If you're doing any of those things, your focus is in the wrong place. In the opposite direction from where you're supposed to be focus. Focus on God. Focus on God's commandments and calling. Your responses in the form of charity or prayers will then be directed to God, focused on God and not on yourself. Covid or no covid, focusing on God rather than ourselves is well within our ability to do.