

A SERMON BY REV. MARTHA M. SHIVERICK
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Matthew 23: 1-12
Sermon: “The Magnificent Obsession”
October 30, 2005

SHHHH! Did you know there is a secret society in our culture of people with the power to achieve true happiness? It's not new. It has been around for centuries and like many secret societies, it exists within our culture and the members of it blend into the daily fabric of our lives and although we might suspect them of being members, they never would admit to it. You know them; they might be you neighbors, your children, your spouse, or even the person sitting next to you in the pew! They can not claim to be in the group, as making such a claim is against the group's primary premise. And you do not ask to become a member. Membership and initiation occurs when you least expect it and it is next to impossible to turn it down. And once you are within the society you are changed forever. You do not leave it as the emotional toll is large. I mean, why would you move away from something that gives you joy? The society has many names... the magnificent obsession, the pay forward, or whatever you, who are in the society, feel comfortable describing it as being. Some things are just so secretive that by even naming them, you risk exposing there very being. And in exposing them, destroy something wonderful.

The closest I have ever heard of this group being exposed is in a novel by Lloyd Douglass published in the 1940's titled the Magnificent Obsession. The light romantic novel tells the story of the death of a well respected and loved doctor and the transformation of another man who inadvertently caused the doctors death. The second man is transformed from self absorption and a destructive hedonistic lifestyle to living a life like the altruistic doctor. In the story, the young man befriends the doctor's widow in an effort to help her. The young man and the doctor's widow discover notes the doctor kept in a secret code and then begin to hear stories of the doctor's odd behavior of helping people and then when people wanted to pay him back, the doctor would refuse it saying that he had already been repaid, and he had already used it up. There was a power the doctor realized that came from his selfless giving. Give things to others without being seen or receiving notoriety and you will receive much. In fact you will achieve everything you want. The equation is clearly in the Bible! In fact it is said in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. If you get notoriety and reward for your good deeds you will not be rewarded in God's eyes. Do it in secret and you will receive a greater reward.

The young man realized the power of what the doctor's notes said. The doctor had achieved and received everything he wanted because he gave of himself to others without receiving recognition. His charity was secret so the reward had not been used up. The young man saw this as an equation to attain the power and selfish desires he had. And to

the greatest surprise of the young man, when he began to practice this life style the doctor reported he did receive his greatest joys and heart's desires. However it wasn't exactly what he bargained for. The joy and desire were wrapped up and related to the good works not a means to achieving them. The young man had indeed become transformed, he was happy doing things for others, and, in doing so, had found perfect happiness.

This secret society usually drafts its members when they are at low points in their lives. What ever got them to that point in their lives is not as significant as the fact that someone reaches out and offers them assistance or help at a time that is crucial. That someone is a member of the secret society and the offer of help is also the offer of initiation into the group. The individual responds by feeling grateful for the care and love and they want to somehow pay back what they have been given. The actual initiation into the group occurs when they try and pay back their debt to the person that helped them and are told they can not. Not only can they not pay them back but it is a secret that they did anything to help them at all. You see the first individual has already been paid; the debt is not owed to them. So the person who received the kindness can not pay it back but must pay it forward and offer the same help, kindness, love and care to another person. You see the person who originally offered the help, was in fact helped by another, and their joy comes in being able to help another person. And so this secret society continues. And the more the individuals pay back, the greater are their rewards and ability to help again. And again, the society continues.

And where did this silly idea come from? Why the Bible of course! This passage from Matthew is also stated in the other Gospels and can be seen as a root for this Magnificent Obsession. It is a theme that runs throughout Jesus' teachings and is familiar to us all. It is an equation for being first, for being great, for being exalted. To be first, you must be last. To be exalted, you first must be a servant. To do so you must do good deeds without others seeing you, you must not wish for the seats of honor at banquets, recognition and accolades in public places and must feel more at home as a servant than a master.

Throughout the Gospel of Matthew the idea of giving without letting others know about your good deed doing is prominent. If you let people know, then you have received your reward but if you "do not let your right hand know what your left hand is doing" you will be rewarded by God. Here Jesus says it again. The people who get their rewards by taking the honored seats at banquets, by receiving VIP status everywhere they go in life have already gotten their rewards. But those that labor for others will receive a far greater reward.

Of course Jesus here is talking about the Scribes and the Pharisees. In the verses following this morning's lectionary text continues the rest of the chapter where Jesus berates them by saying Woe to you to the scribes and Pharisees and calling them hypocrites. Jesus denounces them, saying that they have it all wrong. Their priorities have been misplaced. They care more for what they look like; how the temple is decorated than the ministries they perform. They have forgotten their priority of justice, mercy and faith. One wonderful description Jesus uses is that he says they clean only the

outside of the cup and plate, not seeing that the inside is dirty. They need to clean themselves of greed and self indulgence. These Scribes and Pharisees have it all wrong. Jesus calls them a brood of vipers and warns that they will have to deal with the wrath and judgment of God. Clearly we do not want to be in their shoes!

And how does this speak to us here at Fairmount? We certainly do not sound like the Scribes and Pharisees that Jesus condemns and we will not ever be if we are to stay a healthy vibrant church. We have a beautiful building, this spectacular sanctuary, but more importantly, we are a church with a healthy mission statement. We state our mission is to worship God, to seek the way of Christ, to grow as an inviting caring and challenging community of adults, youth and children, in response to God's unconditional love that transcends all human distinctions and summons us to make a difference in the world. Healthy churches are ones that are focused on mission. Healthy churches can state what God has called them to be. Ask any youth what is meaningful to them about the church. They might list their friends, their choirs, and the undercroft. But they will also mention the opportunity to do service. Whether it is the confirmation class helping serve the community dinner at Bethany Church, the crop walk for hunger relief, or the summer mission trips, these are clearly the most rewarding experiences our kids have at church. And if doing things for others gives our youth rewards, think of the wonderful rewards we will receive from selfless acts of generosity as well.

Reports are now coming in about what worked and what didn't work in the Hurricane Relief efforts following Katrina. Initial findings show that even as a nation, we had moved from thinking the churches and church based groups were relief organizations to thinking that it is the government's job. What had at one time been work congregations and denominations did in responding to people in need became the job of FEMA. And what they found was that in the initial hours and first days after the Hurricane, the government could not respond quickly enough but churches still could. The fast responses of churches saved lives, said state senator Byrne of Louisiana. "Churches can not do what the government will do in the weeks and months to come," he said, "but as far as getting the basic necessities to people in the weeks after the storm, I think that the church played a decisive role." Church officials offer several reasons for their quick response. Some said it was the lack of bureaucracy and others pointed that churches often have the necessary resources for disaster relief such as large buildings for shelters and a closely knit membership from which to find volunteers. Most important, according to relief workers with religious groups, is that the spirit of giving permeates the teachings of all the churches. "The church is not there for itself, but for others," said Clyde Pressly, executive director for the Disaster Recovery Ministry in Mobile. Mr. Pressly continued saying, "We get a sense of joy helping others."

Similarly, a report on NPR immediately following the devastating earthquakes this month interviewed the head of "Doctors without Borders." They were the first group to get into the small towns devastated by the quakes and provided aid. One doctor interviewed said that his group was the only relief team he saw for the first three days. They had been working non stop trying to help the people whose worlds had come crashing down. The reporter asked how many people were paid staff that went into the area and the director

said, no one is paid, they are all volunteers. The reporter said all volunteer! And the doctor replied, they do it because helping others gives them joy. Doing things for others gives them joy!!!

Let's look again at this passage from Matthew. Jesus uses the lifestyle and hypocritical statements made by the Scribes and Pharisees as a teaching experience for his followers. He says, 'Look at these people'. Do as they say but do not do as they do. They might preach the correct message but they do not live out their teachings. They want recognition for everything they do. Their actions are motivated not in concern for justice or for love of others but in their expectation of honor and glory without serving first. Jesus says that they have already gotten paid back for their actions. And we should act differently. If we want the true reward, if we want to achieve happiness, we should do our good deeds quietly and humbly. As we act as God's servants we will be exalted as God's as well.

SHHHHH! So what about this secret society? Would you like to become a member if you already are not one? My guess is that you have been invited to join on several occasions. Haven't you been the recipient of kindness without asking for anything in return? Has not someone stepped in and offered you a hand when you needed it most and then balked at your thank-you saying that it was nothing... they enjoyed what they did or got more out of it than you did. Well, my friend, you have been invited to join. And to accept the membership and continue on this secret society you must look for ways to pay back the grace, the generosity, the love that has been shown to you by returning it to someone in need. Returning it, knowing that by giving it to someone else, you will also be receiving your true reward. The gift is in the giving! No one needs to know. It is a secret. And true happiness will be yours. SHHHH!

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