

All About Honor

Unfortunately, my four years of graduate study at Arizona State University did not give me what I had hoped they would. Namely, a full-time, tenure track job teaching guitar at a major university. Rats! However, they did give me permission to put the letters “D-R” in front of my name. “Dr. Tom Harder!” Doesn’t that have a nice ring to it?! It makes me feel so . . . superior. Fortunately, my next round of graduate studies—at the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary—did land me a job. Namely as Co-Lead Pastor of the Lorraine Avenue Mennonite Church. That also has a nice ring to it. Not only that; my seminary degree gave me permission to put the letters R-E-V in front of my name. “Reverend Tom Harder.” Now that’s really starting to sing! Or better yet, “Reverend Doctor Tom Harder.” I’m so full of myself, I could just float. Above the rest of you, of course!

Boy, does Jesus ever give the Reverend Doctor Tom Harder the “what for” in today’s text! He’s essentially telling me to just take those letters away. Because, guess what? They don’t make me more important or better than anyone else. Rats!

Jesus also gives all his local “Reverends,” namely the scribes and Pharisees, the what-for in today’s passage. (One commentator used the work “excoriate!”) And for a while, it was easy and fun to ride right along. We love excoriating our leaders, don’t we? Saying things like “Our president is such a doofus!” And then we go on to list all the doofus things he has done and continues to do. Kind of like Jesus does with his “favorite people to excoriate”: the scribes and Pharisees. He goes on a rant against them. While we very comfortably and self-righteously cheer him on.

Until Jesus says (in verse 8) those two words that bring us crashing back to earth: “But you.” Suddenly Jesus’ rant is all about us. And we get the slowly sinking feeling that Jesus just may have been talking about us the whole time.

The accusations he makes in his opening tirade against the scribes and Pharisees can all be summarized by one word (anybody want to take a guess?): the word “hypocrite.”

A hypocrite is someone who says one thing and does another. Who doesn’t practice what they preach. Someone who loves the limelight and puts on a real good show, but when the show is over and the lights go off doesn’t lift a finger to help anyone else.

Are we hypocrites? I have to admit I rather enjoy being in the limelight. I enjoy performing, and preaching. But liking limelight is one thing. The critical question is, do I practice what I preach? To which I’m afraid I have to answer “no.” Not always. I love to preach on topics such as loving our neighbors as ourselves. On being aware of the burdens faced by others. I believe that such topics are the heart of the gospel. But when it comes to actually doing something about them, there are too many times when I’m too busy, too lazy, too frugal, too self-absorbed, too plain unwilling to so much as lift a finger to move those burdens. I love the honor of being a pastor. I’m all about the honor. By the way, I also love the smug satisfaction of knowing that my brand of Christianity, my liberal, progressive, open-minded, love-and-peace-centered brand of Christianity, is the right one. But this morning Jesus comes to us and says that it’s not all about honor. Rather, it’s all about doing. It’s not who we are that

matters—it's what we do. It's about lifting a finger. Showing up at the Lord's Diner. Opening my wallet. Writing that letter to the paper or my local congress person. It's all about doing.

Except . . . when it's not. Because it's easy to lose ourselves in all the doing. To lose perspective. To lose track of what matters even more.

We Mennonites are all about the doing. It's our own little badge of pride and self-superiority, our own way of making our phylacteries broad and our fringes long. A phylactery, by the way, was a small leather box which contained portions of the Torah, and was worn by the Pharisees either on their wrist or their forehead in literal obedience to scripture (specifically Deuteronomy 6:8, which commands God's people to bind the word of God to their hands and foreheads). And fringes were attached by the Pharisees' to their prayer shawls as testimony to their prayer life; the longer their fringes, the more frequently and loudly and long they prayed.

For us Mennonites, our perspiration is our phylactery. And our fringes are the number of hours we work in a day. As if our worth as a person is based on what we do. And, how well we do it. Especially in comparison to others.

So Jesus comes to us today and says, "People! It's not all about doing, any more than it's all about honor. What it's really all about," he says in so many words, "is grace." Which is a shorthand way of saying that we don't earn our worth by what we do, or how long or how well we do it. Our worth, rather, is a gift, given and guaranteed by God.

Interestingly, and tragically, we Mennonites can just as easily have either an inflated sense of worth—based on what we do and how hard we work—or we can have a deflated sense of worth, based on the bad assumption that we're supposed to. So that our humility becomes our badge of honor. Do we see how ironic and illogical that is? It's like being proud of how humble we are. Once again, it's not all about honor. Particularly, honor that we earn, or think we need to earn, whether by our perspiration or our humility.

Honor, like grace, is a gift given us by God. And whether we like it or not, Jesus says that God honors each one of us equally. We don't need to be called rabbi, Jesus says, because we all have the same rabbi, of whom we are all students. We don't need to be called "Reverend Doctor," because we all have the same reverend doctor, of whom we are all parishioners, and patients.

You can call me "Reverend Doctor" if you want to. You can call me "Pastor," because after all that is what I am (although not, I repeat, the source of my worth). But you can also simply call me Tom. Because after all, that is the name my parents and God gave me. As it turns out I, like each one of you, am a child of God. No more. No less.

Amen.