**Swiftly Shaping Souls: Embracing Taylor Swift's Passion and Influence"**

Matthew 23:1-12; Theme Reading: “The Man”, Taylor Swift

By Rev. Don Ludwig, November 5, 2023

**Introduction: Understanding Taylor Swift’s Cultural Significance**

Why did Taylor Swift go to the bakery? -- To get some "sweet" revenge-cake!

In these days of division and polarization, I don’t know if there is any human being on the planet that unites more people than Taylor Swift. Just recently, she performed at six completely sold out concerts at the Sofi stadium in LA. I have been to a lot of epic concerts in my life―I grew up in the 80’s―I remember going to Ozzy Osbourne, Pink Floyd and Motley Crue―those were the days. I have seen Metallica three times, PINK - twice and arguably the best band ever, 10 times: RUSH. Last week, I went to see the Taylor Swift Era’s tour. Well actually, I did not see Swift in a Live concert, I saw her at the Beaverton movie theater that's showing the Live concert. I would have never thought of going if it wasn’t for getting Taylor Stewart’s name mixed up with Taylor Smith last week and all of the badgering I received afterwards. But I decided to embrace my freudian slip and make a sermon out of it. That’s what preachers do I guess. And I am here to tell you that Taylor Swift’s Era’s tour (albeit cinematic) was epic!

I did some research on this phenomenon that I knew very little about. Taylor Swift’s unprecedented popularity is undeniable as she was voted artist of the decade,

* Taylor has more number one albums than any female artist in history, tied for any artist in history. She has the most downloaded albums and songs of all time.
* She has won album of the year in country, pop and alternative categories. She is the only person in all of human history who has had all of the top 10 slots on the billboard charts at the same time.
* She has even sparked a few congressional hearings.
* Her Era's tour has raised the GDP of every city she visits by at least 100 million dollars. In Seattle, she actually caused a bonafide earthquake that showed up on the seismograph of the city’s earthquake monitors.
* She gave over 50 million dollars in bonuses to the Era’s tour crew, including $100,000.00 for each of the drivers.

I am amazed at the influence she is having on young and old alike all over the world. She has built quite the reputation for standing up for what is right, standing up for women’s rights, standing up for LGBTQ rights, empowering and advocating for people who feel left out, pushed aside, or marginalized. She has spoken for those who have struggled with their body image and those who feel that they just don't fit in. She is an artist who transcends genres and generations, whose artistry and modern-day poetry has woven its way into the very fabric of our culture. She is no Mother Thersa (as we all know)―but she has a huge heart for the disenfranchised of society and it seems to me that we as progressive christians should take note.

So, today I want to take a few moments to explore some of the themes that I see in Swift's music and life and how her passions and influences can perhaps connect to our own experiences.

**The Power of Vulnerability**

First, Taylor’s music often explores themes of vulnerability and emotional honesty. She wears her authentic self on her sleeve and embraces the broken-hearted and the outcast because she sees herself in the same way in many ways. “We are tied together by an invisible string.” Admittedly, that image was written first for a boyfriend but in later interviews, Taylor acknowledged its’ broader meanings and applications.

One of the vulnerabilities that she describes is that of the woman's experience. In the theme reading today and the song “The Man” she mocks and makes fun of toxic masculinity as she laments misogyny and double standards and the glass ceiling that has forced so many women for so long to work twice as hard or as she says in her song “working twice as fast to get half as far” in a male dominated world that is intentional about keeping women in their place.

We all know this world she speaks of. And we know the history of the Christian church and how the bible is most often used to perpetuate patriarchy and oppress the female species in a binary gendered culture. In fact, any gender that is not a man is―less than ―in our dominant culture.

You might remember the words of Henry Kissinger―“Nobody will ever win the battle of the sexes. There is too much fraternizing with the enemy.”

Yet seriously, this patriarchal theme is present but subtly challenged in our lectionary text today. Let’s hear the words again.

*Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples,* ‘*The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long.”* ― Matthew 23:1-5

What do you make of that? In order to understand this text, you must see it through the sociological lens of sex and gender and culture. Who are these scribes and pharisees? They were certainly not women. We know that. There were “men”!

The truth is this story gives us a keen view of the “man”. The system that gives privilege to men over women, men who think that they can get by without scrutiny or expectation of doing what they teach. Do as I say, don’t do as I do. Who does that sound like? I have never heard a woman say or insinuate something like that? Have you? But I have heard it many times spoken to or referenced to by a man. “The Man!” Because for a woman, humility and grace are always connected to teaching and truth. The truth is that the christian church has not always been out in front championing women rights―the christian church has garnered a bad reputation―for being close minded, traditional, even misogynistic while perpetuating the system of the “Man”.

But Swift has often been on the forefront challenging these issues and all issues that end up with winners and losers. I am reminded of the words of Paul Tillich here, “the courage to be is the courage to accept oneself, in spite of being unacceptable.” Courage―the courage of a woman. Made in the image of God, endowed with inherent worth and dignity, and yet women are bombarded by messages that they are less than and not acceptable. They are told they must be something other than themselves―or be a “bitch”… And Taylor courageously says, that makes me mad as hell. And I know it makes us mad as well―as it should.

**Forgiveness and Empathy**

The second theme in Taylor’s music and life has to do with forgiveness and empathy. In Taylor Swift’s journey, there have been many widely publicized breakups or feuds over the years―feuds with the likes of Kanye West, Calvin Harris, Joe Jonas, Harry Styles, John Mayer and who could forget about Katy Perry. Although it sometimes takes a minute and a song to be written about the relationship before coming around and seeking forgiveness in some way, Taylor usually softens and chooses compassion. Through her, we have had a front row seat to the difficult but transformative power of forgiveness.

Taylor Swift and Katy Perry's friendship took a rocky turn in the public eye, with rumors and subtle jabs fueling their feud for several years. However, in 2018, both stars decided to bury the hatchet and mend their relationship. It was Perry who made the first move by extending a literal olive branch and a heartfelt letter to Swift.

Taylor then shared the olive branch and letter on her Instagram story. The two of them then publicly confirmed their renewed friendship by appearing together in Swift's music video "You Need To Calm Down" in 2019. Their on-screen embrace marked the end of their feud. Since then, they have been supportive of each other in public and have shown that friendships can indeed be repaired, even after years of tension.

**Compassion and South Africa**

And finally, one of the things that has inspired me about Taylor Swift’s passion and influences is that she has not only captured our hearts with her music but has also touched the lives of individuals in so many places around the world through her compassion. She is the story of how one person's passion for music can become a beacon of hope and catalyst for change, even across continents. One country, in particular, is none other than: South Africa. Let me share with you some of the ways Swift is involved in South Africa:

1. In South Africa, education is a cornerstone of progress. Taylor has contributed significantly to education initiatives, providing scholarships and building schools.
2. Taylor has provided aid to various South African causes, including healthcare, hunger relief, and disaster response.
3. Taylor has been a vocal advocate for equality and human rights in the aftermath and continued struggle against apartheid and discrimination in South Africa.

Knowing all of this (and much of this I learned for the first time this week), makes me want to call Taylor Swift and see if she is interested in being a chaperone on our South Africa mission trip this summer. Or at least to ask her to donate to the Silent Auction!

**Conclusion**

Swift has encouraged her fans on multiple occasions to be kind to one another and to practice compassion. She has often emphasized the significance of supporting others, standing up against bullying, and embracing differences. She is not perfect, no one is. But by embracing the power of our own vulnerabilities, by practicing forgiveness and empathy, by being compassionate to others near and far, Taylor shows us what it looks like to be authentic and even humble.

Taylor Swift is a 33 year-old woman who just recently became a billionaire and is now listed on the Forbes 500 list. She uses so much of that power and wealth and influence for good. May we find inspiration in her music and lyrics that echo the universal truths of the human experience―that all are acceptable―that all are welcome―that all are equal! And may we too continue to use our own passions and influences for good.

May the Swift be with you. // **A-men**.