

When practicing what we preach, let our lives be the message



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

I saw this quote the other day from Xunzi, an ancient Chinese scholar: “The learning of the petty person enters their ear and comes out of their mouth. [The learning of a wise person] enters their ear, clings to their mind, spreads through their four limbs and manifests itself in their actions.”

I’ve always appreciated wise words about being wise. This quote seems a good lesson in itself, something for both the “petty” and the “wise” to take to heart.

In a college World Religions class I wrote a paper on Master Kung (Confucius, born in 551 BCE — Before the Common Era), impressed by his practical wisdom. As a philosopher and teacher he was, like Socrates, Buddha, Jesus and others, a truth-teller, expounding truths that often make other philosophers, teachers and religious leaders angry or uneasy.

One of his students asked Master Kung how to practice the basic ethic of humanity. The Master responded: “Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you.” The student replied: “May I put your saying into practice.”

This instruction smoothly connects with Master Kung’s lesson for another student: “A superior (wise, balanced) person acts before they speak and then speaks according to their action.”

We’re all familiar with, “Practice what you preach,” but this takes it to the next step: “Preach what you practice.” In other words, as Xunzi says, learning must go through your ears, mind and body before coming to

fruition in decisive action. Let your life be the message, then, if you need to teach or preach, you can speak with some real authority.

Remember “The Word became flesh”? A wise word or meaningful message means nothing until it becomes flesh, gets incarnated — embodied — in us, our lives, our world. “Do as I say, not as I do” is the opposite of wisdom — and a big yellow caution sign to go elsewhere for better instruction.

This isn’t about one special person — a “divine teacher.” It doesn’t have to be about god or faith. The thread of these teachings merely (and profoundly) point us back to ourselves, our true nature, and therein we discover once again our connection and relationship to everyone, maybe everything — at least everything that really matters.

There were many times as a chaplain when I would approach someone — in a jail cell, in a shelter or on the street — introduce myself and ask if there was anything I could do for them. Most people were very receptive and respected my position and role as a chaplain. Some did not. There were people who responded by ignoring me, turning or walking away. A few would say things like, “Leave me alone,” “Go away” or worse. I expected the unexpected so didn’t take it personally. People have divergent experiences with “clergy-types” and religion in general. I understand.

I’ve been considering several difficult questions, at least I’m sure they will be troubling for some:

What if the thousands upon thousands of hours devoted to worship, prayer, praise, study of scripture and other “religious activities” were devoted to feeding people, housing them, providing medical assistance, preventing disease and war, securing human rights, etc.? Would we be so busy doing what was needed that the “spiritual things” would become less important?

And, what if those countless hours, days and weeks



CHRIS HIGHLAND/SPECIAL TO ASHEVILLE CITIZEN TIMES

were spent addressing daily needs instead of the deeply divisive cultural issues (“culture wars”)? If a preacher’s preaching or a teacher’s teaching centers on the supernatural and otherworldly, we can expect they would be distracted by “hot button” issues instead of addressing real concerns all people of conscience think are critically important.

Hypocrisy is another relevant word. Jesus had many “woe unto’s” for the hypocrites — those who don’t practice what they preach, or they preach at others without giving much care to what they themselves say or do.

A jail inmate once taught me a simple rule: Each time you point at someone else, there are three fingers pointing back at you. I’ve always remembered those words. We’re quick to point out the flaws in others but a bit slow in seeing our own. To paraphrase the Nazarene: “Woe to you who point out a splinter in another’s eye and don’t notice the whole tree in your own eye.”

I keep circling back to Xunzi. How much of what we hear goes in our ears and straight out of our mouths? What might be possible if we chewed on things a little more before swallowing? What could happen when we use our natural (or “god-given”) sense of reason to let ideas cling to our minds for a while and try them out before we believe them, pass them along or preach them?