

Sunday November 5th, 2017
Proper 26

PRAYER: When no justice rolls down, O Lord, you will not join our feasting. When the waters of righteousness are slowed by sin, you will not listen to our singing.

Draw us toward Wisdom, O God. We shall rise early to find her. She wanders the streets looking for us, stopping us in our paths. She will lead us out from sin's desert. Then justice shall roll down, and righteousness shall flow, and the thirsty ones shall thirst no more.

STEWARDSHIP: The Apostle Paul's words from Romans 12:1 still convict us of the truth when he writes, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer yourselves as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God-which is your spiritual worship."

PASTORAL PRAYER: Beloved God, it is so reassuring to us to know that when others send us away, you always welcome us with open arms. When the world closes its doors to us, you swing the gates to your throne room wide open. If our friends and even family run from us, you quickly run toward us. If our sin makes us untouchable, you in your grace touch us and heal us. How the world hates you for loving us so fully. At a time when judgment and punishment come so easily to so many, you offer forgiveness and reconciliation, and the world screams at the unfairness of it all. Of course, it is unfair. Everything you have ever done for your people is unfair. If you had treated us fairly, we would be without hope. We have no claim to your love or your attention, but you unfairly shower it down on all of us. The world cannot comprehend this, or accept this, but you are bigger than this world, and your love transcends our fractured sense of fairness.

O God, whose compassion is beyond measure, we marvel at the healing power of your generous touch. So many, of us face the relentless demons of: ill health, poverty, ruined relationships, pride and a legion of others.

While we complain to you about our deprivation, and lack of this world's spoils, others are shackled with an overabundance, unable to see beyond their greed. These worldly demons haunt our thoughts and even our dreams. We find ourselves enslaved by forces we cannot control or just simply let go. O Gracious God, shatter our bonds. Break the chains that bind us to empty promises and frivolous endeavors. Help us by your Holy Spirit to embrace true life and enter its abundance.

Keep us, we pray from the temptation to pass our burdens onto others, when you are the one who offers an easy yoke. Give us grace sufficient, to forgive and forget, the trespasses of others. Give us the Wisdom of Solomon when confronted by choices that baffle us, or when important matters hang in the balance. Focus our collective vision as a church on the important matters, and keep us, we pray, from becoming bogged down in the trivial.

O God, we await the full blossoming of your redemption of this world and the full impact of your salvation in our lives. May the image of Christ, who visited the most untouchable of people, in the most unclean of society, inspire us to greater works of mercy and compassion. Make us bold in fulfilling our call to heal wounded spirits and broken bodies, so that all those touched by your grace may demonstrate the power of faith.

BENEDICTION: People of Christ, encourage and build up one another. Strengthen the fainthearted, lift up the weak, be patient with the anxious, and rejoice in all circumstances. The one who calls you is faithful; the God of peace shall make you whole. Amen.

Sunday November 5th, 2017
Proper 26

Matthew 23:1-12
“Why are you Religious?”

Emo Phillips (a very funny comedian), was quoted as saying, “I was my neighbour’s imaginary friend” or “I found my wife in bed with another man. I was crushed. So, I said, will you two get off me.” Phillip’s wrote a joke that has been told, and retold many times, and in September of 2005 The Guardian website conducted a poll in which it was picked as the best joke ever. I share it with you, because it leads into our topic for today, and because I think its quite funny.

Once I saw this guy on a bridge about to jump. I said, "Don't do it!" He said, "Nobody loves me." I said, "God loves you. Do you believe in God?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Are you a Christian or a Jew?" He said, "A Christian." I said, "Me, too! Protestant or Catholic?" He said, "Protestant." I said, "Me, too! What franchise?" He said, "Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?" He said, "Northern Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?"

He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region." I said, "Me, too!" Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879, or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912." I said, "Die, heretic!" And I pushed him over.

Is there are difference between your religion, and your faith? I know they are intimately connected, but are they in any way separate entities? I think they are and the best way I have ever come to terms to describe the difference, is that faith is what you ultimately believe, and religion is how you practice that faith, or the practical application of that faith. I think we all instinctively know there is a difference.

For a number of people, I think there is a real inner conflict between their religion and their faith. At some time, in all of our lives, there arises a crisis, or experience, that challenges our beliefs or our faith; but we continue to carry out our religion, in the desperate hope that somehow the two will reconnect. Perhaps that is why some folks are so insistent on certain religious practices done in a certain way, because it is a façade covering their internal doubts.

We even joke about it this disconnect between faith and religion. I get into trouble all the time at home, when Laura asks me to do something I don’t particularly want to do, and my lame attempt at humour to express my displeasure at the task is to say what? “I can’t. It’s against my religion.” I don’t know how cleaning bathrooms is against any religion, but I still try to claim it is. Even the secular world knows the difference between faith and religion.

Recently, you may have read or heard about the new law in Quebec banning religious face coverings from provincial employees, and those seeking provincial services. In other words, a woman wearing a niqab because of her religion, must now reveal her face if she wishes to get a health card, or driver’s license. Recent polling, nationwide, reveals that a clear majority of Canadians agree with Quebec’s stand on this. It is okay, we tell ourselves, to believe what you like as far as faith goes, as long as your religion is not overtly in front of me.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus is addressing two major issues when it comes to faith and religion. Now, I should mention again that Matthew is very intentional in setting the scenes of his biblical records. In particular, he seeks to be accurate about who Jesus is speaking to, and where. Matthew 23 begins with Jesus addressing not the religious leaders, but the crowd that was following him, and his own disciples. There would have been scribes, and Pharisees in the crowd, but he ignores them until verse 13, and speaks instead to those the leaders are to lead.

The first thing Jesus says, may actually surprise you. He states that the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat. Perhaps I have not explained yet, a bit more about these Pharisees. The Pharisees were always men, and most often from wealthier families. There were not priests, nor could they be. Priests had to be from the tribe of Levi, or be Levites. This was God's decision back in Moses' day. So, excluded from priestly service, men from other tribes took to studying the law.

This was not only expected of every Jewish man, but encouraged. For a lack of a better description, these Pharisees were a sect of Judaism, committed to the law and applying it. Today in the church we might describe them loosely as laymen, but they took their task very seriously. The people in Jesus' day revered them, and depended on them to help them avoid transgressing the law. People would often consult them on matters of law, or to learn what they should do.

So, when Jesus says they sit on Moses' seat, he is acknowledging that the Pharisees are an authority on these matters of the law. Jesus is not dismissing them as irrelevant, quite the contrary actually. Jesus encourages the crowd, and his disciples, to listen to these men when they talk about the law and to follow what they say. However, Jesus also says that you should follow what they say, but do not do what they do.

In a word, he is saying they are hypocritical. That the Pharisees are very adept at teaching the truth about the law, but often fail to follow it themselves. Remember Paul the Apostle? He was a Pharisee, and a very devout one. Before his conversion, he carried a great deal of clout among the Pharisees, and in the Jewish court called the Sanhedrin. As he says of himself, "I was zealous for the faith of my fathers."

So, we might wonder what he might say to his fellow Pharisees after his conversion. Well wonder no more. Romans 2:17 and following reads,

But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast of your relationship to God and know his will and determine what is best because you are instructed in the law, and if you are sure that you are a guide to the blind, a light to those in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth, you, then, that teach others, will you not teach yourself?"

Yet there was more than just hypocrisy at work here. Jesus mentions the heavy burdens the Pharisees placed on people, which they themselves avoided. We might forget that beyond the law there was the application of the law. The Pharisees would learn the law of Moses, but then create elaborate interpretations, that they claimed helped people avoid violating the law. However, these additional rules, created tremendous hardship for people, particularly the poor.

Sunday November 5th, 2017
Proper 26

In struggling to make ends meet, many of the poor would violate maybe not the law, but certainly the interpretation of the law. The law might forbid the consumption of certain foods, but if you are hungry, and you could easily secure non-kosher foods, well, you have to eat. Desperate people often feel compelled to do whatever they can to survive, even in violation against the law. But the Pharisees could have actually been more law abiding, if they had lessened the burden on people.

Maybe instead of condemning someone for eating non-kosher food, they could have given them some food, or money, to buy proper food. Instead of condemning the tax-collector, the prostitute, or the leper, how about finding ways to help them get out of their predicament, or be cared for in a loving way. And lest we think the church is exempt from such critiques, we are not. Our religion, has in the past, and maybe still does, caused untold burdens on people.

How many people over the years have avoided the fellowship of God's people, because they felt they couldn't measure up. Maybe they felt they weren't knowledgeable enough about God, or they couldn't afford the right clothes, or couldn't give enough money to gain respect, and a welcome among God's people. Maybe we still put burdens on people. Perhaps not overtly, but maybe by our quiet acceptance of certain standards we think people need to meet.

A member of an upper-class downtown church tells the following story. "It was a cold winter's day that Sunday. The parking lot to the church was filling up quickly. I noticed as I got out of my car that fellow church members were whispering among themselves as they walked to the church. As I got closer, I saw a man leaned up against the wall outside the church. He was almost lying down as if he was asleep. He had on a long trench coat that was almost in shreds and a hat topped his head, pulled down so you couldn't see his face.

He wore shoes that looked 30 years old, too small for his feet. With holes all over them, his toes stuck out. I assumed this man was homeless and asleep, so I walked on by through the doors of the Church. We all enjoyed fellowship for a few minutes, and then someone brought up the man who was lying outside. People snickered and gossiped, but no one bothered to ask him to come in, including me. A few moments later, church began.

We all waited for the preacher to take his place and give us The Word when the doors to the church opened. In came the homeless man, walking down the aisle with his head down. People gasped and whispered and made faces. He made his way down the aisle and up onto the pulpit. When he took off his hat and coat, my heart sank. There stood our preacher. He was the "homeless man". No one said a word. The room was silent and still. The preacher took his Bible and laid it on the stand.

"Folks, I don't think I have to tell you what I'm preaching about today. Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'" He proceeded to preach a sermon about treating others with dignity and kindness even if they seem to be the "least".

The second concern Jesus raises in this passage is described by him as "They desire to do all their deeds to be seen by others, for they make their phylacteries broad and fringes long.

Sunday November 5th, 2017
Proper 26

They love to have the places of honour at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues and to be greeted with respect in the market places and to have people call them rabbi.” (vs. 5-7)

I guess the first thing I should explain is what a phylactery is. Simply put, a phylactery is a small leather box, in which Hebrew scripture verses are placed and Jewish men wear them on their foreheads, to remind them while at prayer to obey the law. Jesus is suggesting that these Pharisees in question make huge big ones to show off to the public. It's a way of appearing to be more devout. This is the case also with wearing long fringes on their robes.

The other things they do, actually help us understand what Jesus is getting at. The Pharisees loved attention. They used their religion to gain prestige, influence, and also just a few verses further on we read about financial gains. Jesus talks about how they devour widow's houses. What happened here was that Pharisees would try and find themselves a sponsor, often a rich widow, who they would talk into financially supporting them so they could focus on the law.

In general, Jesus is talking about using your religion for personal gain; whether it be monetary gain, or popularity. Quite often these two things go hand in hand. At the heart of this problem is our egos. We trick ourselves, or get tempted into believing our own press. We erroneously believe that the world, or more accurately, the faith community, revolves around us. For ministers it is a particularly awful temptation.

It can lead sometimes to the most ridiculous scenarios. I remember hearing from Michael Strain, then Pastor at Villa Nova Baptist Church a story when I was at Tyrrell about a guest preacher who came to his church for their anniversary. Michael greeted him when he arrived and proceeded to acquaint him with the sanctuary and pulpit. Immediately, this guest replied that he had brought his own pulpit with him to preach from, and it was imperative that it be installed on the platform. Needless to say, his congregation were less than pleased.

Ministers are particularly prone to this problem, but lay people as well can succumb. It is tempting to want to be noticed, to be acknowledged. To have people talk about how wonderful we are. I heard about a man who was being honoured by his church family with a banquet and was expected to give a speech. The man who introduced the honouree went on and on in great praise about the speaker's qualifications and achievements.

The honouree was a bit embarrassed by the flowery introduction, and so began his remarks with this, “You know, I came here in the hope of hearing a fascinating speech. I was hoping to hear my lips drip brilliant phrases and memorable stories. Now I have to tell you after that glowing introduction, I'm afraid I'm going to be disappointed.” I know, as well as you do, stories of church folk who get down right angry because their efforts, or contributions, are not acknowledged.

One of the things Jesus said in this passage that I find particularly convicting is when he critiques the Pharisees for demanding they be called Rabbi. Then Jesus talks about how that is presumptuous. Henri Nouwen in his book “In the Name of Jesus” writes about how imperative it is to be willing to be led, rather than lead all the time. To be open to being taught, as opposed to being compelled to teach constantly.

Sunday November 5th, 2017
Proper 26

In God's Kingdom, Jesus is stating that we are all students. We all have things we can learn. We all have ways we can grow and mature. There is no place in the Kingdom, for anyone who doesn't feel they can be stretched intellectually, and spiritually. This rigidity of thinking we often describe as being "narrow minded". This passage is really about the nature of healthy leadership. More specifically Kingdom of God leadership.

Jesus specifically calls it here and elsewhere as servant leadership. Jesus told us that he came not to be served, but to serve, and he wants that same attitude from his followers. Thus, we come head on to the hardest lesson from this passage; humility. Humility; that elusive of character traits. For the moment you think you've achieved humility is the moment you have lost it. Or as I like to joke, "Please be ready to receive my new book, 'Humility and how I Achieved it.'"

Then there is the story about the woman who was dying, and her family had gathered around her death bed. As she was fading, the family began to talk about what a wonderful mother and grandmother she had been. They talked about her great cooking, her hard work, her volunteer service etc. After a few minutes of this the woman spoke up with a very weak and raspy voice. "Don't forget to remember how humble I am."

I think Jesus helps us with humility; with reminding us that we need to keep first and foremost in our minds and hearts our actual place in this universe. God isn't looking for religious people. God is looking for faithful people. God is looking for people whose hearts are aligned with his, and whose hearts can be nurtured, led, and crafted into humble people committed to serving in his name. Are you, am I, one of those persons?