

Sunday November 5<sup>th</sup>, 2023  
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 several people, I think there is a real inner conflict between their religion and their faith. At some time, in all 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 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, if your religion is not overtly in front of me.

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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 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. 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.

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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 must eat. Desperate people often feel compelled to do whatever they can to survive, even in violation against the law. But the Pharisees could have 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.

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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 marketplaces 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, help us understand what Jesus is getting at. The Pharisees loved attention. They used their religion to gain prestige, influence, and 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. Michael’s 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 must 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 downright 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.

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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?