

Jesus Denounces Scribes and Pharisees – Matthew 23:1-12

23 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, ² “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; ³ therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. ⁴ 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. ⁵ They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. ⁶ They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, ⁷ and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. ⁸ But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students.[Ⓜ] ⁹ And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. ¹⁰ Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah.[Ⓜ] ¹¹ The greatest among you will be your servant. ¹² All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

We are all familiar with the desire for accolades and honor. And, perhaps more than once, we’ve desired that without wanting to do the work or follow the path we ask others to follow. The Pharisees and scribes that Jesus encounters today are guilty of that; of espousing strict and elaborate adherence to the law and putting that burden on the shoulders of the people with no help or guidance, only the appearance of piety and the demand for respect.

One way these religious leaders display their piety is with phylacteries and fringes. Phylacteries are small leather boxes that contain scrolls of the Torah - the Torah being the repository of the law. Devout Jews wear these on their forehead fixed in place by a strip of leather. I found this a little hard to envision - so here’s a picture of someone wearing one. When Jesus says their phylacteries are broad - he is pointing out that they can be easily seen by others. So wearing such a visible sign of piety, in this case, is more for show than it is to help the wearer be more faithful. The long fringes are tassels that affix to the four corners of a garment and are intended to remind the wearer of the 10 Commandments. The longer the tassels are the more often the wearer would see them and thus be more attuned to the commandments in their actions - supposedly. Jesus implies that these pharisees wear long ones so everyone will notice them and think the Pharisees holy.

It is not an uncommon desire for us to want to be thought of as important. It is not always or often a bad thing. Since we’ve been connecting on Zoom so much we all get to see bits of each other’s homes. The place where I work has pictures on the wall behind me. If I sit in a certain way, the picture of the church I served in Vermont can be seen; in another position a wooden cross hanging from another picture is visible. More than once I’ve had the thought, ‘move over so people can see how religious you are.’ The key difference between my wanting to look very religious and the Pharisees and scribes wanting to be thought extremely righteous is awareness.

Jesus derides these Pharisees and scribes for using their public display of piety to appear better than others, to tell the people what to do. Yet, they are so busy swanning about the marketplace and synagogue, they have no time to help those they’ve put heavy burdens on. Dressed in fine ritual clothing, they avoid the hungry and the sick. There is a desire for status; there is a desire for that status

to be acknowledged by those beneath them, there is a desire for status without any attendant responsibilities.

I suppose there is no job anywhere that provides more opportunities for public adulation and public derision than President of the United States. In any time, place or person. So much of the job is public or ceremonial, any individual might begin to think themselves better than other people.

With the upcoming election, we are very focussed on the two individuals running for president and their different styles of campaigning and governing. I'll tell you right now - I'm going to vote for Joe Biden and I hope he wins. Others among us are voting for Donald Trump and hoping he is victorious. That determination, the choice between two men, is the simple part of what's happening in our nation. The real question of the election seems to be who America is, who America will become, who belongs here - who is important and who is not. And we have a tendency to think that WE know the answer to that and that there is only one answer..

With these essential questions seeming unsettled, it feels that we are sitting on a powder keg and playing with matches. Some of the clashes we've had between groups of citizens - legitimate protestors, illegitimate troublemakers, and armed militias are scary. While we vilify one candidate for whipping up division, I know that I, at least, watch these armed groups with fear, disdain and more than a bit of superiority.

I've listened to people talk about the horrors of a liberal take over - and I don't agree with them; no it isn't that I don't agree with them, it's that I don't believe what they believe. If I believed what they believe - I might feel the exact same fear. I suspect it's the same with the other perspective - that I am viewed as misguided and uninformed; at the least naive and at the worst, and probably closer to the truth, arrogant.

I have a lot of theories about what's happening in our country, as I'm sure you do. My theories often lean into certainties. And I am not unlike the Pharisees with their phylacteries. Recently I purchased a copy of the Federalist Papers to look up things that were being transgressed. Somehow, while rearranging stuff at home, we encountered a little booklet of the Constitution. Between the two, I feel I have the ammunition to prove who is right and who is wrong - and boy, is my TV going to be humiliated when I start yelling this stuff at it.

That is where I usually end up - with certainties. And, I know there's a fair amount of certainties in the opposite opinions. And, ammunition in the form of information. You might think that all this yelling testifies to our desire to communicate. I can't speak for others, my wanting to 'communicate' is more like a lecture than an exchange; and my listening is more silence while waiting for my turn than it is trying to hear another's heart.

There is an election in a few days and God is downhearted. God sees it all, us all, God's creation in pain of every imaginable way AND God sees the bumbling and sometimes brilliant ways humankind tries to alleviate it. The election will determine which of America's children feel triumphant and which feel more alienated than they already did. But God will feel no triumph - God doesn't even know or care who you vote for. God is seeing a beautiful experiment continue to edge toward something else. And no matter who you support or vote for, that is what we are clinging onto - America the way WE see it, America the way WE know it should be. This is where we are and where we will be on November 4th or 14th or whenever a president is named. Winning isn't highly thought of in heaven.

I remember the first time the Williams sisters - Venus and Serena - tennis phenomena - played against each other in a major tournament final - Wimbledon. Venus (the older sister) won but rather than

jumping for joy in her usual manner, she went immediately to the chair next to her crying sister and tried to comfort her. During the closing ceremonies, the mood was more somber than jubilant. There was no winner that day.

From God's viewpoint, there will be no winner on November 3. The work that needs to be done is among the people; is ours to do; is ours to do with God's help. It would be amazing if we could see each other as God sees us, if we could know the heart of the person standing in front of us, trying to block our path. What might be as important and as powerful as seeing our opponent's heart, is seeing our own, seeing it and listening to it and accepting what we find there - not as inevitable, but as the truth of the moment. There is no other heart we can know.

And boy, is it hard to get below the reactions and the assumptions and the judgment. The only way I can do that is to pray about what God's will is for how I think and act, for what the real truth is - not about how many people attend an inauguration, or use an unauthorized email server, but the real truth that God is ultimately in charge, that as long as we fight living that truth, we will be sure we are different, better, smarter than another who perhaps thinks the same thing about us. It is when we invite God into every encounter, that any superiority or inferiority fades away. Imagine a verbal jousting between political rivals and imagine God standing with them - would God be found cheering on one or the other? Or would God see each combatant as a Child of God, in pain from fear and alienation.

Voting is a moment in this war between God's Children. Of course, your values and your beliefs should inform how you vote on Tuesday. But it is your faith that should inform how you act after that; faith that God is in it with us; that God holds the ultimate truth, faith in what God wants and faith that, with God, we can bring it into being. We may not currently have a mechanism to establish this healing but if we do not open our hearts and seek to see one another through God's eyes, there never will be one. Someone has to take the first step, to embrace the humility Jesus urges us to adopt. Let it be that from our open heart, love flows out, and like the spread of the virus, everyone who encounters love will take it home to their family. But unlike the virus, when love comes into a house, love from another who has seen us through God's eyes, it can bring about tremendous healing, in fact it is the only thing that can. Pray for our nation; pray for God to be in it with us;