

Cosmic Humility

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Psalm 107, Matthew 23:1-12

Matthew 23:1-12

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.

They love to have the place of honor 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.

But you are not to be called rabbi,
for you have one teacher, and you are all students.

And call no one your father on earth,
for you have one Father— the one in heaven.

Nor are you to be called instructors,
for you have one instructor, the Messiah.

The greatest among you will be your servant.

All who exalt themselves will be humbled,
and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

Cosmic Humility

The next words uplifting words out of Jesus' mouth are "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees..."

Woe to you!

In our scripture reading today, we get a glimpse of the community in which Matthew gathers his material and completes his gospel. It's a marginal community that's hashing out an identity even while the surrounding Jewish community struggles to regroup in the aftermath of an unsuccessful revolt against Rome in 70AD.

Pharisees were part of a lay reform movement that began during another rebellion, the Maccabean revolt, which happened one and a half centuries before the birth of Jesus. In the time of Jesus Christ, the Pharisees had they joined the Sadducees, the Qumran Essenes, and the Zealots, as one of four mainstream expressions of Judaism.

After the fall of Jerusalem and destruction of the Temple in 70AD, they were the only surviving "Jewish authorities."

In this passage, we can hear Matthew's gospel seeking to distinguish the early church community from the shape and the authority of the Jewish community which was its root.

Drawing on the sociological study of identity, New Testament scholars demonstrate that Matthew's gospel defines the early Christian community in contrast with the identity of OTHERS both Jews and Gentiles alike.

As Judy Siker writes, "Identity theory... argues that we construct who we are largely by construction of who we are not."¹ This pattern is found in Matthew's gospel, beginning early in chapter 3 as John the Baptist calls the religious authorities a "brood of vipers."

So, in Matthew 23, those "OTHERS" have authority, but misuse it.

THEY preen before the respect of the community.

THEY are hypocrites, who talk the talk but don't walk the walk.

I could stand up here and join Jesus, laying into the modern day hypocrites who mistake pious words and orthodox beliefs for faithfulness.² We could take our time and point out all the modern day scribes and Pharisees —those "others" against whom we can carefully construct our own Christian identity.

We could do that—enjoy a morning of contrasts by naming and denouncing the hypocrites of our day — and wouldn't that feel good!

But, I'm standing before you in a "Geneva Robe" complete with clerical collar, that is feeling a little tight right now, wearing preaching tabs, standing in that chief place of proclamation that we call a pulpit, bearing the title Teaching Elder, and standing on feet that are sometimes made of clay.

Can you say phylacteries and fringes?

If we point our fingers at the hypocrites, surely we must turn that finger on ourselves. Because we are all hypocrites in some form or fashion are we not? Even the earliest disciples—whom we now call Apostles and Saints—argued over who would be greatest among them.

As Pogo once said, "we have met the enemy and the enemy is us..."

So it seems that we cannot reliably shape our identity in direct opposition to some hypocritical "other" and despite the invective that has grown harsher across the centuries, neither could the church of Matthew's day.

Yet, this theme of emerging identity IS important, and if the comparison to the unrighteous "OTHER" does not provide the source of identity in this text, what does?

The text itself provides some clues.

I can report that the Greek speaks with a "Southern" accent!

The hypocritical THEY **are loving** the places of honor—the "proto-cathedra" or chief seat of power in the synagogues. And THEY **are loving** the "proto-klisian" or chief reclining place seat at table.

Those "proto" words give us a clue about what Jesus says next, because the Pharisees desire is about more than having the power seat at temple or the best place at dinner. In their desire these authorities would act as "PROTO-types" from whom religious followers might derive identity.

And this is the NO that we hear from Jesus this morning. He is very clear, "Whatever they say, DO and KEEP—But DO NOT shape yourselves according to what they do."

Jesus does not argue their authority, OR the validity of their interpretation of Torah, OR even the ways that they instruct others to keep it. Yet, he disputes any ambition, any human impulse to become the source of identity by which the community is shaped.

"You have ONE teacher... ONE Father... ONE instructor ..."

"You are ALL students... You are ALL brothers and sisters..."

As Tim Beach-Verhey proclaims, "The point of this passage concerns the true nature of discipleship, rather than a condemnation of a particular people or religion."³

Our identity comes—not in opposition to the OTHER, but in relationship to God, who is Rabbi/master/teacher, Father in heaven, instructor, and Messiah.

We are students/learners/brothers and sisters—peers, and we are called to humility that finds leadership in service. In lives where the last become first and the first becomes last.

In God's grace, we are overturned from our preoccupation with success and status and survival and certainty and given the space to be loved as we are—despite our flaws and failings and feet of clay.

Friar Richard Rohr writes, "It seems that God is asking humanity to live inside of a cosmic humility, as God also does. In that holding pattern, we bear the ambiguity, the inconsistencies, and the brokenness of all things (which might be called love), instead of insisting on dividing reality into the supposed good guys and the certain bad guys as our dualistic mind loves to imagine... Jesus never said, 'you must be right,' or much less, 'You must be sure you are good and right.' Instead he said, 'You must love one another.' His agenda is about growing in faith, hope and love."⁴

Imagine what it's like to hold that cosmic humility in our hearts. Imagine what it might be like to be defined—not by the rules or faltering attempts at self-righteousness—but as an embodied response to Divine Encounter with our Rabbi, master, teacher, Father, Mother, instructor, Messiah, redeemer, and friend.

And isn't that just the invitation Jesus gives, whenever he says, "follow me."

Two millennia have passed since that invitation rang out along the shores of Galilee. So, I've thought a lot this week, about the ways that invitation comes to us across the ages.

Not the how, but the who...

I've thought of those early communities, of the gospel writers, of the martyrs and the mavericks, who shared their faith and lifted up the invitation to see—not their example—but the Christ.

I've thought about the love of my grandmother, who taught me her favorite hymns at the Magnus Chord Organ in her living room; of my mother, who read Bible stories to me; of my father, who led my confirmation classes.

I've thought about Mrs. Miles, Trinity Presbyterian Church's pre-school teacher, who introduced me to God's miracle of seed and soil.

I am amazed at the ways the invitation of Jesus unfolds through the lives of so many, beautifully flawed, yet faithful people whose lives point to God in their service to others.

They are the saints of whom the Apostle Paul spoke; the flesh and blood servants of Jesus Christ, who share the journey of life and faith with us; fellow students and brothers and sisters in faith.

As the calendar turns to November, we take time remember and give thanks for the saints in our lives—particularly those we have lost to death.

This year, among my saints is Lucille Jones, who was mother to my childhood friend. She opened her home and her heart to a socially awkward teen and with her gentle care and concern created a space of welcome and safety throughout the breadth my life.

As her witness, Miss Lucy bore the ambiguity, the inconsistencies, and the brokenness of many, *many* things in a way that can most certainly be called love. I am grateful to have known her and through her hospitality to have experienced the God who loved her and whom she loved in return.

On this All Saints Sunday I am reminded of a simple “preachers” story.

A little boy went to Church with his grandfather one Sunday. It seems that Grandpa's church had beautiful stained-glass windows—much like ours.

Before the service began, Grandpa proudly showed the boy all the windows taking care to point out the Saints: Saint Matthew, Saint Mark, Saint Luke, Saint John, Saint Paul...

Returning home, the boy gushed with enthusiasm as he told his mom and dad all about it.

Unable to resist, his dad asked, 'So, what's a saint?'

The boy became very quiet, thought for a minute, and then said, 'Daddy, a saint's somebody the light shines through.'⁵

Who are your saints?

Friends, like the crowds and the disciples we are invited by Jesus into the grace of God. It's an invitation that shines through the humble and imperfect lives of those who love and seek to serve God by serving others.

May their witness strengthen our faith, and may we grow ever more transparent in faith and hope and love. Amen.

¹ Judy Yates Siker. *Unmasking the Enemy*. Perspectives in Religious Studies, 32 no 2. Summer 2005. 114.

² Tim Beach-Verhey. *Theological Perspective on Matthew 23:1-12*. Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4. 264.

³ Ibid. 260.

⁴ Richard Rohr. *Freedom in Not Knowing*. <http://conta.cc/1tMUyhb>.

⁵ Billy D. Strayhorn. *Stewardship reflections on readings for the twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost*. “Radical Gratitude”. October 27, 2008. www.umfnw.org.