

Matthew 23:1-12

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."

We are all Special

When we hear the Gospel on Sunday mornings, we sometimes forget that the Gospel is a narrative and that we are usually in the middle of the story.

Today we are at the end of a discussion Jesus has been having with political leaders and religious leaders – the Herodians, the Sadducees, the Pharisees, the elders and the scribes. For us the discussion has been spread over more than a month. We started hearing it way back in September.

But for Jesus, his disciples, the people gathered around – rich and poor, men and women – and the leaders, it is all happening one afternoon, an afternoon, probably Tuesday or Wednesday in the last week of Jesus' life, an afternoon following Sunday's crowd-pleasing, palm-waving procession into Jerusalem and Monday's overturning of the money changers' tables at the Temple.

Here in the Temple Jesus has been questioned and has questioned the powerful and the privileged, men who were not only religious leaders but also civic and political leaders. They are angered and dismayed that this nobody from nowhere, this Nazarene from Galilee, has come into town during the time of

preparation for one of the most sacred events of the religious calendar and has disrupted their lives and has shown he can draw crowds. They fear he will cause civil unrest and bring down the Romans on everyone.

For them the discussion has not been going well.

Over the last weeks we heard that Jesus had "silenced the Sadducees" with his questions and then that he had left the Pharisees and scribes unable to ask him anything more.

We might say that Jesus has won the war of words.

Maybe, but the discussion in the Temple during the last week of his life is not a philosophic discussion or a political or religious debate. It is a matter of life and death.

Jesus knows that when the leaders turn away from him, when they have no more questions, when they are unwilling to continue asking, learning, and thinking, when they don't open themselves to new ways of being - when they can't see and don't listen - more than a debate is lost.

He knows that he might have bested them with words, but he has lost the struggle for their hearts.

He knows what will happen next – they will go to the Romans and rid themselves of him and his questions and his parabolic answers forever.

And he grieves for what might have been, for the community that could have been.

I see him slowly walking away from the Temple Courts and shaking his head sorrowfully.

He turns to his disciples and the others gathered around and talks softly to those still with him.

What does he say to these followers? What does he say to the people who came to Jerusalem with him on his long walk from Galilee and the people who have come up to listen during this long afternoon? The people who, like us, think he has won the war of words.

He says, "When the scribes and Pharisees – those people – read the Torah to you and teach the Torah to you, listen to them, learn from them, and do what the Torah commands."

But he also says, "Listen to them, but do not act like them."

What are they doing that makes them such bad examples?

They certainly don't think they are behaving poorly. They think they are setting a good example. After all, they know the Law and they are only telling everyone what it is and how to fulfill it. They don't think they are requiring a heavy burden. They don't think that their concern with minutia of the Law is concern with minutia or that it is burdensome to others since it isn't burdensome to them. To them it's probably a joy.

They live in nice houses. They have water to wash with, dishes to eat off of. They have time for study.

Their rules are about ritual, and cleanliness, and diet. Their rules mark them and those who can and do keep them as God's people, different from the Romans and the Greeks, different from the Syriophonicians, and the Samaritans, different from the sinners -like the tax collectors and prostitutes, different from the Jesus people.

They think they are special because they aren't like those others. And nearly everyone agrees with them. Everyone but Jesus.

Jesus says, "Look at them" - and he turns and looks back after them -

"Look at them in their broad phylacteries and long tassels. They wear their religion, but they aren't living it."

He doesn't say they shouldn't wear phylacteries and tassels.

After all, he is wearing phylacteries and his shawl has definitely has tassels.

Phylacteries are little boxes made of leather. Jesus, like other Jewish men, would wear one tied to his left arm and one tied to his forehead. He would put them on in the morning before his prayers and take them off in the evening after his prayers.

In them are passages copied from the Torah - two from Exodus and two from Deuteronomy. Jesus, and the other men, wear the phylacteries because the Torah says,

"Bind these words on your hand and forehead."

What words? These words –

"Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

The men wear tassels hanging from the corners of their shawls because God told them to put the tassels on the shawls so that they "will remember and do all [my] God's commandments and be holy."

These are supposed to be little boxes and bits of thread, not large boxes and not long tassels. They are for each person's remembering, not something to wear ostentatiously to show others how holy the wearer is.

It is the one who wears them who is to remember the Torah and the commandments and how God saved Israel to be his people.

It is the one who wears them who is to remember the greatness and oneness of God.

They are to remember and to do, remember and live into the life, the holiness Torah demands.

They might remember, but Jesus sorrowfully says they aren't doing, they aren't being holy. They take the best seats, not just at banquets which might be expected, but in the synagogue. They like titles, like to be called Rabbi - Master, Teacher.

They are pride-full and self-full.

They could have been Jesus people, but they couldn't see, they didn't hear.

And he grieves.

He tells those around him that they are to give up titles.

He is their Rabbi, their Teacher, they need no other. They are all his students, they are all equals.

They have no father but God.

They will be servants, one to another, just as he has been servant to them. Like him, they will be humble and self-less and their selflessness will make them great.

It is hard to believe the Sadducees, Pharisees, Herodians, the elders and the scribes walked away and gave up the argument.

It is hard for us to believe they couldn't hear, didn't see.

We hear this Gospel reading and think, "Those people sure were hypocrites!"

But were they? They were people trying as hard as they could to live according to God's commandments. They were trying to be faithful. They honestly thought that God wanted them to keep apart from others, to make distinctions between themselves and others, sinners or Gentiles. They didn't think they were excluding other Jews but setting a good example. And they thought that was what they were supposed to do; this was how they were supposed to teach.

But obviously Jesus didn't think so. He agreed that they are scholars and teachers but he obviously thought there are other ways to teach Torah – and that some of the lessons they were teaching were not the ones he, or they, really wanted others to learn. He thought they should teach by living, really living into the spirit, not only the letter of the Law.

When he pointed out their failures, Jesus was probably thinking ahead, thinking of that someday when Peter and Andrew, James and John would be the important ones. They would be the leaders and the teachers. They would be the elders. What kind of leaders would they be? Would they be leaders like he showed them to be, not imposing burdens but helping everyone to live authentically and fully?

Would they truly be Jesus people? Would they set an example of Christian leadership for generations to come or would they try to protect themselves with legalisms and power and privilege? Would they learn the lesson he was teaching?

"You have one teacher," Jesus said to them.

"You have one Father - the one in heaven ... you have one instructor, the Messiah."

What Good News this was to them and is to us!

We often think we have to “pass the test”. We have to pray the right prayers and say the right words. We think that will make us “special” but in reality that thinking just keeps us stuck in today, unable to imagine an alternative way of being (which I think was really the problem back then with those Sadducees, Pharisees, Herodians, scribes and elders).

In Jesus’ school there is no test. He only asks us to learn that, yes, we are “special” and that everyone is “special” just because. He asks us to learn that there is nothing, absolutely nothing, nothing we can do to make us more special in God’s eyes than we already are. He wants us to know the grades are in and we have passed!

All we have to do, just as all the Sadducees, the Pharisees, the Herodians, the elders and the scribes had to do, is open our ears, open our eyes ---

**Open our eyes, Lord, we want to see Jesus,
to reach out and touch Him and say that we love Him.
Open our ears, Lord, and help us to listen.
Open our eyes, Lord, we want to see Jesus. Amen.**