

Tearing Down the Phylactery Factory

Matthew 23:1-12

October 30, 2011

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 market-places, 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.

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Those scribes and Pharisees. What a bunch of obnoxious, vain, spiritually lazy, know-it-alls. Taking the pew of honor in the synagogue. Walking around, puffed up, with a sense of entitlement. Wearing their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. Like, “look at me! I’m more important than you!”

Oh, they *sounded* good. They talked a good game. Footnotes all in order. Always ready with an argument. Convincing in their reasoning. Supporting scripture at their fingertips.

But to think about how they treated the widows...and the orphans! Shame on them. Were they not listening to the sermons they preached? About God siding with the poor? About righteousness rolling down like a mighty stream?

Where was the accountability? How did those bums not get thrown out in the street?

It’s a good thing Jesus had the courage to call a spade a spade. I stopped reading right about the point that Jesus really took the scribes and Pharisees to task. Unleashing a series of “woes” – Jesus uses tactful turns of phrase like “you brood of vipers!” “you blind fools!” “you snakes!” in denouncing the behavior of those morally bankrupt, nothing-but-show, religious leaders.

It makes me think of a prayer that Dr. Lee Morgan often raises to my attention when he thinks I am being too humble: “God, I thank you that I am not like those other people.”

Yes, I certainly am glad that I am not like those scribes and Pharisees. Why, I don’t think broad phylacteries and long fringes would add much to my handmade stole, and my woolen robe (made by Bentley and Simon in New York, by the way). No...long fringes and broad phylacteries would look downright tacky on my robe, especially after I get my stripes after completing my Doctor of Ministry degree.

I don’t even think I could handle being in the same room as people like the scribes and Pharisees if they were standing in one corner of my office and I was standing in the other...and do you know how big my office is? That’s saying something!

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Maybe I watched a little too much Jon Stewart this week, but I can't help the satire or miss the connection as a "religious professional" like the ones Jesus rails against in today's scripture.

Today is Reformation Sunday – that day that we Protestants remember our heritage as well as our history of breaking apart from the Roman Catholic Church in the 16th century. Let me say from the onset, because I know that there are a number of former Catholics and current Catholics and Presby-Catholics in the room, that you do not need to start slumping down in your pew and worry that the preacher is going to make you self-conscience.

To be honest, I'm a little at a loss to understand why the committee (whoever they are) that chooses the lectionary (the scripture passages suggested for our reading) decided on this passage from Matthew today.

A rabid Reformationist might see in this passage a direct connection to the long series of events that led Martin Luther to call out the religious leaders of the day on the fact that they were not practicing what they were preaching when he nailed his 95 thesis to the church door in Wittenburg, Germany on Halloween 494 years ago. I don't think that is the intent, but it is possible.

If you wanted to make that connection, it wouldn't be hard to argue that we are due for another Reformation...because the many of the same hypocrisies are in place. It turns out that all religions and religious leaders – whether they are leaders in the ancient Jewish temple, Roman Catholics in the 16th century, or established Protestants in the 21st century – struggle to live out the faith they proclaim.

It's too simple to say that the Protestant Reformation was more about hypocrisy than theology. Certainly, there were – and are – substantive theological differences between Catholics and Protestants...actual differences in some of the things we believe. But there can be no doubt that the public opinion that fueled the separatist Protestant movement was a reflection of outrage over the abuse of religious authority and the church failing to practice what it preached.

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A few years ago a research group called The Barna Institute surveyed 16-29 year olds about their opinion of the church...not the Catholic Church, or the Protestant Church, or the Presbyterian Church....but the Church in general. Among people who are not involved in religious life (i.e., the ones with whom we are called to share the good news of the gospel), 85% viewed the church as hypocritical and 89% saw us as judgmental.¹

That doesn't mean that the people who make up First Presbyterian Church of Shreveport, Louisiana are all hypocrites. At least, no more than anyone else. I happen to think we do a good job of trying to practice what we preach. What the survey shows is that the Christian faith – of every stripe – has a perception problem.

There are a couple of ways to address this problem; this perception problem the Church has that is increasing as more and more of the culture around us becomes unchurched.

One way is by turning up the heat. You've seen churches do this...they seem to relish the acrimony between the church and the culture. If there are increasing numbers of people outside the church who think we are hypocritical and judgmental...well, they just don't get it. Best to circle the wagons and move on to do what we do well. May God have pity on their souls...

Another way to address the issue is by pandering. You've seen churches do this, too...water it down, make faith easy, tell people what they want to hear. Soft-peddle the harder sayings of Jesus – you know, the things that make our faith seem exclusive and demanding. Just get people in the door and then, presto!, we can assimilate them into believing just like us.

I happen to think that both alternatives do little to help our perception problem – in fact, they may make it worse.

Taking our lead from today's passage, one of the things that it is remarkable is what Jesus says about the scribes and Pharisees to those of us listening...that is, what Jesus says before he goes on to let us know that we should not do what they do; before Jesus calls them snakes, and liars, and fools. Before all of that, almost unbelievably, Jesus says “do whatever they teach you, and follow it.”

¹ http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2007-10-10-christians-young_N.htm

On the surface, it sounds like Jesus is the hypocrite. Follow what those snakes and fools teach? Is Jesus listening to his own sermon?

But Jesus tells us to follow because – from the text – “the scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat.” In 21st century language, the scribes and Pharisees have studied scripture and the scripture they teach from has authority. In other words, no matter how badly the preacher’s life reflects the faith they proclaim, the Bible at the source of that proclamation should guide us.

That’s where I think the church – and all of us – can be authentic to our faith and humble in relationship to the rest of the world.

On the cover of your bulletin is a quote that, if you are Presbyterian, you have probably heard before. At least the first part. It is our “motto” as a denomination – a motto with its source in the Reformation of almost 500 years ago. The first, and more familiar part is, “the church reformed, always being reformed.” The second, less familiar part, “according to the Word of God.”

It is a good enough motto that I think we should be willing to share with any kind of church that wants to use it. To heck with copyright infringement!

The church reformed, always being reformed according to the Word of God.

The message that sends a world that – without a doubt – needs the good news of the gospel; a world that – without a doubt, has reason to look with suspicion at a faith that talks about justice and peace and wholeness but so often doesn’t practice it – the message our motto sends is that we are always a work in progress.

And while we believe in truth, and are guided by it in Scripture, we never possess it. By definition, that means we are always open to learning more, always open to being more, always open to welcoming more, and always being reformed.²

² I would be remiss if I didn’t say that my understanding of and appreciation for Reformed theology stems from my professor, the late Shirley Guthrie, who wrote a book called Always Being Reformed.