

Simultaneously Saints and Sinners

November 5, 2017 Matthew 23:1-13a

Pastor Roger Barkley Congregational Church of Northridge

They probably didn't start out that way.

I'm talking about the Pharisees, the group of people for whom Jesus reserved his most blistering criticism.

Matthew 23:13 *“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.”*

That's a harsh accusation, but they probably didn't start out that way.

I imagine a young man so in love with God and so inspired by his faith that he devoted all his free time to studying scripture and debating its fine points with old men - free time when others relaxed with friends and family.

This led him to become a Pharisee, a man so devoted to God that he could quote the entire Law and Prophets by heart, as well as hundreds upon hundreds of scholarly interpretations.

But step by unconscious step, this idealistic man drifts from the things he most valued, until one day he's publicly dressed down by this rabbi from Galilee.

This unconscious drift from living the values we profess can happen to any of us.

As a matter of fact, did you notice that in the passage Rob just read that Jesus actually commended their teaching?

Matthew 23:2-3a *“The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must be careful to do everything they tell you.”*

Jesus may have used the term “Moses' seat” metaphorically to recognize their authority as teachers, but it eventually became an actual chair of honor that faced the congregation from the front of the synagogue.

So, Jesus did not criticize their *talk*; he called them out on their *walk*.

Matthew 23:3b *But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach.*”

I keep thinking about that young man studying to become a Pharisee, and wondering what happened along the way for him to drift so far from his teaching.

For several weeks, our scripture has followed this encounter between Jesus and various religious leaders who challenged his authority.

Today, Jesus turns his back on them to speak directly to his followers – using his opponents as examples of what happens when we drift from our faith and values.

Spiritually-conscious living guides us to act from a place of love and vision and to stay faithful to our values.

For some of us, spiritually conscious living is new.

Our family background, old habits, and past hurts had determined our feelings and reactions.

But your history does not have to be your destiny.

For others, we just follow knee jerk reactions to whatever problems pop-up.

But your reactions do not have to be blind, and your motivations do not have arise from fear.

Motivation by fear was an underlying problem for the Pharisees, indeed for legalists of all times.

The Pharisees loved the Law of Moses, which they saw as a gift from God.

But they couldn't trust people to love and obey it in the same way they did.

So, to protect God's commandments from neglect or unintentional infringement, they established layers of rules for everyday life that, to use an old Hebrew term, would “make a fence around the Law”.

These rules are called *khumrot*.

They don't appear in appear in scripture, but their intention is to safeguard scriptural commandments.

The rationale for a *khumra* comes from Deuteronomy 22:8, which says that when you build a house, you must build a fence around the roof in order to avoid guilt should someone fall off the roof.

In that culture, by the way, the flat roof over the living quarters was often a gathering place for family and neighbors.

In practice, the *khumrot* multiplied and controlled more and more, becoming a burden to people's lives.

One of countless examples is that tailors were not allowed to go outside carrying a needle late in the day before the Sabbath.

Why?

Because if the tailor somehow got distracted or delayed, he might get caught with a work tool in his pocket when the Sabbath began and work was to be set aside.

Fear is never satisfied, so the joyous, liberating gifts of God's Law became buried beneath more and more, stricter and stricter rules.

No wonder legalists become rigid, joyless and fear-driven.

When our teachers are fear-driven, they focus on rules and try to force us to obey.

That's the case with an actual teacher or leader, and it is equally true for our own inner voice.

Some of us live in a constant state of anxiety, dread or shame because we aren't living-up to what our inner-voice demands of us – which only fuels our guilt and fear.

But Jesus teaches that his yoke is easy because his motivation arises from love, not fear.

Matthew 11:28-30 *“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and*

humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

St. Augustine’s classic criterion for faithful interpretation rests on the principle that scripture’s purpose is for us to love God and love our neighbor.

When we act with love, we inspire people with a vision of God’s care and purpose.

Back in 1940, a nine-year-old black child and his mother were walking down a South African sidewalk when they saw a tall white man dressed in a black suit coming towards them.

By law, a black person was required to step in the gutter to allow a white person to pass, and to nod their head as a gesture of respect.

Many years later, Desmond Tutu would recall that unusual day.

Before he and his mom could step off the sidewalk, the white man, himself, stepped into the gutter and, as he passed, he tipped his hat in a gesture of respect to Desmond’s mother!

The white man was Trevor Huddleston, an Anglican priest who was bitterly opposed to apartheid, and his bold gesture changed Tutu’s life.

Desmond’s mother explained to her son that Trevor Huddleston had stepped off the sidewalk because he was a true man of God.

Years later, Tutu told the BBC that in that moment he found his calling.

He said, “When she told me that he was an Anglican priest I decided then and there that I wanted to be an Anglican priest too.”

Huddleston later became a mentor to Desmond Tutu and his commitment to dismantle Apartheid.

Sometimes we assume that Jesus was criticizing the Pharisees just because they sought public recognition.

Matthew 23:6-7 “... they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called ‘Rabbi’ by others.

But these were expected social practices in their time.

An honor-shame society, in which they lived, was a zero-sum game.

That means that if someone else got the seat of honor at a banquet, for example, then your status was reduced as you were assigned a lesser seat.

If someone else was greeted with respect, your status was lowered.

Furthermore, Pharisees were not guaranteed status like priests or village elders.

Their status depended on their wits and how they were received by their community.

So, the Pharisees were constantly recruiting new followers and competing for influence with other groups and leaders.

Jesus criticized their constant seeking of status on two grounds.

First, their personal motives ... what were they getting out of it?

Were they competing for their message to be heard, for God to be loved, or was it for self-aggrandizement?

Were they feeding some ego beast within, or were they being sure their faith message was front and center?

An old Cherokee was teaching his grandson about life.

He said, "A fight is going on inside me. It's a ferocious fight between two wolves.

"One wolf is angry, greedy, arrogant, self-pitying and filled with false pride.

"The other wolf is nurturing, forgiving and humble."

The little boy became wide-eyed and asked which one would win.

His grandfather replied, "The one I feed."

Last week we celebrated the 500th Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, which reminded me of Martin Luther's famous statement that we are simultaneously saints and sinners.

And, just as the old Cherokee understood, we choose which we will feed: the saint or the sinner.

The spiritual discipline of regular confession is to help us discern our motives ... where are we feeding our ego-beasts, our pettiness, our resentments, or our prejudices?

How can we move toward living humbly, generously and forgivingly?

This is very much what our stewardship program is about.

Discerning what are my values.

Looking at how my time, talent and finances actually line-up with what I profess.

Confessing where I fall short and making changes.

Giving becomes an act of liberation.

Next week we will present our Estimates of Giving toward our 2018 budget.

We don't make stewardship a guilt trip, we present it as Jesus did: an invitation to faithful discipleship.

An invitation of aligning our giving with our faith.

We are blessed to be blessings ... and we receive blessings in return.

It's a spiritual circle of blessing enhanced the more we are in balance.

The second critique Jesus raised was not personal against an individual Pharisee; it was a critique of the whole social system that built the fences around people.

Wherever someone is left out of God's grace or society's justice, we have gone astray, and as Christians we are called to take a stand.

In 2004 Victor Yushchenko ran for the president of the Ukraine.

Vehemently opposed by the Russian-backed ruling party, Yushchenko's face was disfigured and he almost lost his life when he was mysteriously poisoned.

But this was not enough to deter him from standing for the presidency.

On the day of the election, Yushchenko was comfortably in the lead.

However, the ruling party tampered with the results, and that evening the state-run television falsely reported that he had been decisively defeated.

In the lower right-hand corner of the screen a woman named Natalia Dmitruk was providing a translation service for the deaf community.

As the news presenter regurgitated the lies of the regime, Natalia refused to translate them.

"I'm addressing all the deaf citizens of Ukraine" she signed. "They are lying and I'm ashamed to translate those lies. Yushchenko is our president."

The deaf community sprang into action.

They text messaged their friends about the fraudulent result and as news spread of Dmitruk's act of defiance increasing numbers of journalists were inspired to likewise tell the truth.

Over the coming weeks the "Orange Revolution" was born, a new election was held and Victor Yushchenko became president.

Philip Yancey writes

"When I heard the story behind the orange revolution, the image of a small screen of truth in the corner of the big screen became for me an ideal picture of the church. You see we as a church do not control the big screen. (When we do, we usually mess it up.) Go to any magazine rack or turn on the television and you see a consistent message. What matters is how beautiful you are, how much money or power you have..... Then, like the sign language translator in the lower right-hand corner of the screen, along comes a person named Jesus who says in effect, *Don't believe the big screen – they're lying. It's the poor who are blessed, not the rich. Mourners are blessed too, as well as those who hunger and thirst, and the*

persecuted (for justice). Those who go through life thinking they're on top end up on the bottom. And those who go through life feeling they're on the bottom end up on the top. After all, what does it profit a person to gain the whole world and lose his soul?

Our faith professes love and justice as God-given values, and our country professes liberty and justice for all.

Where reality doesn't match what we profess – where we don't walk our talk – then it is the church's responsibility to speak-up.

Where there is a justice system that serves the rich and neglects the poor, it is the church's responsibility to speak-up.

Bryan Stevenson has devoted his law practice to serving the poor, and at times he's been frustrated and despaired at the inequality our citizens face.

One time he was preparing for a trial of a 14-year old who was being tried as an adult – a conviction could have locked him up for life.

Bryan felt frazzled and impatient late one night when he fired off a motion he titled, "Motion to try my poor, 14-year-old black male client like a privileged, white 75-year-old corporate executive."

We've made a lot of progress in our society, but not in our justice system.

In 1972, 300,000 people were in jails and prisons.

Today, there are 2.3-million ... and a growing number are in long-term solitary confinement, which the United Nations calls cruel and unusual punishment which should be banned except in extreme situations and for as short a time as possible.

But it is not uncommon for our prisoners to spend many months and even years in solitary confinement – at last count, between 80,000 and 100,000 people.

The United States has the highest rate of incarceration in the world – disproportionately affecting poor, minority communities.

If you are poor and a minority, you are more likely to be arrested, more likely to be convicted, and more likely to get a longer sentence.

In the Old South, blacks are 11-times more likely to get the death penalty than whites ... 22 times more if their victim was white.

Think how this affects those communities.

One out of three American black men between the ages of 18 and 30 is in jail, in prison, on probation or parole.

In some urban communities across this country, 50 to 60 percent of all young men of color are in jail or prison, or on probation or parole.

Sometimes we hear that this has driven down crime rates – but every reasonable analysis disputes that.

Did you know that in Alabama, if you are convicted of a crime you permanently lose your right to vote?

34% of black men have forever lost their right to vote in Alabama.

Providence, Rhode Island: 32% of black males have lost their vote, compared to 3% of whites.

Do you think that might swing elections in certain directions?

And there are movements all around the country to enact similar laws.

This shouldn't be a Democrat or Republican issue ... it is a Christian issue if we believe in love and justice, and it is a national issue if we believe in liberty and justice for all.

So, when Jesus calls out the Pharisees because their walk doesn't match their talk, we should take note.

We should take personal note of how our own walk matches our values.

And we should take note of places where our nation's walk doesn't match our talk.

The Pharisees that Jesus criticized for not walking their talk?

They probably didn't start that way.

But step by unconscious step that's where they ended up.

Jesus calls us to be more.