

“Please Drive Gently”

November 2, 2008

Psalm 107; Matthew 23:1-12

Today is **All Saints Day**, the day we remember with gratitude those whose lives bear witness to the blessing of God, both past and present. It is ALL Saints Day.

But as you heard in our reading from Matthew, not everyone who was thought to be a “saint” in Jesus’ day was one. Not even if that person “sat in the seat of Moses.”

By the time Matthew’s Gospel was written, Jews who believed Jesus was the Messiah and Jews who did not believe Jesus was the Messiah were in earnest debate over the future of the Jewish faith. Roman legions had destroyed Jerusalem in AD 70, the Temple had been torn down, and survivors of the Jewish revolt against Rome had been scattered. The community of faith that produced Matthew’s Gospel was located in Northern Galilee, or in Greater Syria (as it was known then), the same location as the community that developed what we now know as rabbinic Judaism. Persons who professed Jesus as the Messiah must have lived and worked side-by-side with persons who did not profess Jesus as the Messiah. Every aspect of Jewish life was up for grabs; was subject to reinterpretation; was in a state of flux, including Jewish leadership. Scholars think the Pharisees were the force that enabled Judaism to survive, so of course they were the target of debate with the early church.

But those same scholars think that the reason we know of the debate over leadership between synagogue and church is because the comments made about synagogue leadership is also very applicable to church leadership.

Doug Hare says our Gospel lection for today contains at least four different criticisms of Pharisaic teachers. 1) they do not practice what they preach. “Do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach.” 2) they offered stringent interpretations of the law, creating a real burden for people to follow. “They tie up heavy burdens and place them on men’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.” 3) their piety sought adulation. “Everything they do is done for men to see: they make their phylacteries wide and the tassels of their prayer shawls long...” 4) there was a lust for recognition: “...they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them ‘Rabbi.’”

This seems to be the way of all leadership. We are so prone to attend our own self-interest. Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely. Bertram Atwood says this paragraph from Matthew teaches us how to be great, but the way to greatness is perilous! At the end of the four criticisms comes Matthew’s

prescription for greatness: to be truly great one must serve others. Let's think about leadership in detail.

1. First of all, **those who think they are great, usually aren't**. They are all a bit like Little Jack Horner, who "put in his thumb and pulled out a plum and said, 'what a good boy am I.'" They expect rewards, expect accolades, expect praise. Those of us who attended the Men's Breakfast yesterday morning heard Mike Miller allude repeatedly to the egos of those involved in political conventions. Jesus warned: *whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted*.

Of course this is paradoxical. If I humble myself in order to be exalted I have not humbled myself at all! According to his autobiography, Benjamin Franklin made for himself a list of virtues as a goal for his life. Last among them was this: "Humility. Imitate Christ and Socrates." Can you imagine Franklin mumbling to himself, "I'm being humble, I'm being humble: I'm imitating Christ and Socrates, I'm imitating Christ and Socrates." You can't do it by trying to do it!

I once attended a revival in Pikeville, Ky when I was going to college. The preacher's topic was humility. He got wound up in his presentation, shouting, gesticulating. And I sweat to you that at one point in his sermon he said, "Humble people cry and I cry all the time!"

John Sheldon wrote: "Humility is a virtue all preach, none practice, and yet everybody is content to hear. The master thinks it good doctrine for his servant, the laity for the clergy, and the clergy for the laity."

2. Those who think they are great, usually aren't. Secondly, **those for whom the gospel becomes a burden are not great either**. I hope this isn't too subtle. Let me illustrate:

Ingmar Bergman's autobiography is entitled The Magic Lantern. Ingmar was the son of a Swedish Lutheran pastor who raised his son according to this pattern: from sin to punishment to grace to forgiveness. But it was mechanical and burdensome. When he was quite young Ingmar found the family's maid in the kitchen crying bitterly. Then she left in a hurry with her belongings. Years later Ingmar asked his mother what had happened to Linnea. She told him that the girl had been pregnant, and the man had denied paternity. As a pastor's family could hardly house a pregnant servant, Ingmar's father had dismissed her, despite his mother's protests. A few weeks after that the girl's body was found in a canal, where she had drowned herself. For Bergman's father the gospel was a burden rather than a burden-bearing for others.

How hard it must have been for that Lutheran family! As Shakespeare wrote: "False face must hide what false heart doth know!"

T.R. Glover said the cross of Christ means that we could not atone for our own sins; Christ did it for us. He said monkeys carry their young on their backs and let them hold on as best as they can. Cats, on the other hand, carry kittens in their mouth, holding them tightly with no effort required on the part of the kitten. Glover said we need more cat-religion, not monkey-religion.

Those who think they are great usually aren't, those for whom the gospel becomes a burden—or is a burden to lay on others—are not among the great, either.

3. Surely what Jesus says here in Matthew 23 is that **those who really do deserve the designation “great” are those who serve.** And just as the truly humble would never recognize themselves as such, the truly great would never, ever see themselves that way. I suppose we, too, fail to see the truly great for what they are!

Charles Rand Kennedy's play, *Servant in the House*, is about a missionary bishop who arrived at a rich man's house for a week-end. He was poorly dressed, so when he knocked at the door he wasn't given a chance to tell the maid who he was. She sent him around to the servant-entrance because she thought he was the extra waiter come to serve dinner in honor of the visiting bishop.

Nadine Gordimer is a South African novelist. She has written a story entitled *July's People*. July was a black servant in the home of English planters. Marauding tribes burned their home and they had to flee. July went with them to care for “his people.” It was the servant July who led them to safety, foraged for their food, kept their car going. *The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.*

If you ever drive north on 83 into Pennsylvania, you will see a large sign greeting you at the Mason-Dixon Line. On the right hand side of the sign is the silhouette of a state trooper. In bold print it reads, “Speed Limits.” Then there is a chart that tells you how much you will be fined if you break the law:

55-60 mph—\$50

60-65 mph—\$100

65-70 mph—\$125

and so on and so forth. Someone in Pennsylvania is very determined to be precise in laying out the letter of the law.

One the other hand, as you drive south into Maryland you are greeted with a sign that says pretty much the same thing but with an entirely different spirit. This sign reads:

Welcome to Maryland
Please Drive Gently

By Jesus' day, there were 613 laws specifying what was right and what was wrong. In addition, there were hundreds of other "rulings" and "regulations" designed to keep you from breaking one of those laws. For instance, doing no work on the Sabbath was a law. But what constituted work? Scribes and Pharisees variously classified work as carrying "food, equal in weight to one dried fig" or carrying "enough wine for mixing in a goblet" or pouring "enough milk for one swallow", "honey enough to put on a wound" "ink enough to write two letters of the alphabet" and so forth. People's lives were micro-managed to the nth degree! They became conditions for our relationship with God.

Jesus cut through that sort of Pharisaic legalism so we can drive gently—so we can live gently! How do we live gently? By serving God and by serving each other.