

What Is Missing in Our Leaders
A Sermon on Matthew 23:1-12
Proper 26
November 5, 2017

Introduction

What Judy just read sounds pretty harsh on scribes and Pharisees, but Matthew is just getting started. Immediately after this text there are seven woes to scribes and Pharisees. The first three woes start: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” The fourth and fifth woes are about blindness: “Woe to you, blind guides. . . . You blind fools! How blind you are!” The sixth woe: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth. So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.” In the seventh and final woe, Matthew calls them: “You snakes, you brood of vipers!”

This is the same gospel that begins with the Sermon on the Mount. Judge not, lest you be judged. Love your enemies. We have to ask, is Matthew a screaming hypocrite? Does Matthew love his enemies? Or even worse, do these woes go back to the historical Jesus? Could Jesus actually say such things?

First Move: A Process Hermeneutic

Chapter 23 offends us. The Pharisees were the ancestors in faith of rabbinic Judaism. The two rabbis who spoke here in the last three months, Vered Harris and Abby Jacobson, are modern-day descendants of Pharisees. Imagine how offended they would be if we read this text when they were here. They probably wouldn’t come back.

We can’t just ignore texts like these. We have to deal with them. How do we interpret offensive texts? How do we find good news in them?

The earliest Christian heresy was Marcionism. Marcion created his own New Testament; it contained only an edited version of Luke and of Paul’s letters and left out everything else. Some ministers in effect do the same thing today. They preach one sermon series after another, picking which texts fit the theme of the sermon series. It is easy from them to wind up preaching on their favorite texts and skipping the ones they don’t like.

That is one of the beauties of the Revised Common Lectionary. Over a three-year period, it covers most of the New Testament and a good part of the Old Testament. It forces the minister to preach on, and the congregation to hear, a broad range of texts.

A process hermeneutic is helpful in interpreting difficult texts. It is a way of interpreting Biblical texts that is consistent with process theology. Mary and I both are deeply influenced by process theology. If you want to learn more about process theology, come to our Wednesday night discussion group.

Ronald Farmer, a New Testament scholar, describes a process hermeneutic as a method of interpreting Scripture that pays special attention to those texts that are inconsistent with our worldview. If we only read texts that we agree with, our theology will be trivial. We will be living in a bubble. It may a noble-sounding bubble. We have a theology that God is love or that God is non violent, which is true, but we don't want to hear texts that challenge those beliefs. We don't want to hear that God got angry at the Hebrew people for worshiping the golden calf and that Moses tried to appease God by killing 3,000 Israelites. Judy is still upset about that.

A process hermeneutic assumes that God is calling to us through Scripture. Instead of rejecting a text that is foreign to our sensibilities, we try to discern the call of God. We hold that text in contrast with our own beliefs. We hope that this tension will produce a novel pattern that is large enough to include both the foreign and the familiar in a harmonious contrast. We are not abandoning our old beliefs. We are open to new propositions that expand our perspective.

Second Move: Turning the Text Toward Ourselves

First we have to grapple with what offends us about the text. It is impossible for us to hear this text after the Holocaust without bringing to mind how Christians have demonized Jews over the centuries, calling them Christ killers. Christians in Europe forced Jews to live in urban ghettos, separate and apart from Christians in the city, culminating in the Final Solution. That was not the original intent of the text. Jews were an oppressed minority in Roman culture. Followers of Christ in Matthew's day were still Jews; they were a movement within Judaism. They were arguing with Pharisees over the direction that Judaism should take after Rome destroyed the Temple in 70 C.E. Christianity was not yet a separate religion. The Christ followers had no political power and were losing influence in the synagogues. Matthew and his community apparently were bitter that the Pharisees had prevailed. Most Jews followed the Pharisees and rejected Christ as the Messiah. Matthew was upset and disappointed about that.

The situation is different today. There are three billion Christians in the world. Christianity has been the dominant world religion for the past 1,700 years. Christians had power; they could and did persecute Jews.

When we hear this text today, we cannot think of it as Christians against Jews. It was a dispute within a family of Jews. Think of it today as an argument between mainline and evangelical Christians about the direction that Christianity should take today. Except you would also have to imagine that Christians were an oppressed minority within the larger culture.

Commentators point out that name-calling like this was common in the Hellenistic world. Every philosophical school vilified its opponents and accused them of being hypocrites. Luke Johnson, a Catholic scholar, says that the polemic in Matthew 23 is mild by Hellenistic standards.

We also should consider how Christian tradition interpreted this text. Only in the earliest period was the text used to establish boundaries between Christians and Jews. The text was later used as a polemic against new religious adversaries. Luther used it to describe Catholic opponents. That was a minority interpretation though. The dominant interpretation was that Christians applied the text against themselves. Preachers exhorted their parishioners not to be hypocrites and not to seek honor for themselves.

We also must consider whether these words come from the historical Jesus or from Matthew. The scholars in the Jesus Seminar believe that all of Chapter 23 comes from Matthew and Matthew's community, not from Jesus, except verses 5, 6 and 7, which do not name scribes and Pharisees. These verses are a critique of unspecified religious leaders who make wide their phylacteries and make long their tassels. They like to take the first seat in the synagogue and to be greeted as Rabbi in the marketplace.

These verses seem to contradict the teaching in the Sermon on the Mount—judge not lest you be judged. They could be considered a prophetic critique of the religious leaders. Prophets throughout the Old Testament rage against religious leaders who misuse the gifts they have been given by God, using these gifts for their own benefit instead of being shepherds for the people.

For the scribes and Pharisees to sit upon the seat of Moses means that they teach Scripture in the synagogue. Matthew says, "Do and keep all things whatever they might tell you." He condemns their practice not their teaching. He approves of their way of teaching that is based upon the Torah. This suggests that Matthew and the Pharisees have much in common.

Matthew has three objections to the scribes and the Pharisees: (1) They say but they do not do, (2) they burden others while failing to help them carry the burden, and (3) they act for the wrong reason, to make an impression on others. In short, they are poor leaders. They do not embody the higher righteousness of the Sermon on the Mount. Their character is lacking.

Stanley Hauerwas, a theologian of Christian ethics who we are reading on Wednesday nights, points out that hypocrisy is morally ambiguous. “The hypocrite at least keeps alive what they and we should be.” Matthew’s judgments against the scribes and Pharisees may be harsh because he believes they are close to the kingdom.

Matthew’s denunciation of them could be considered a form of moral exhortation to the disciples—he is holding up the scribes and Pharisees as a negative foil to illustrate the virtues that disciples are to have. It is not enough to say the right thing—you also have to do it and do it for the right reasons.

Eugene Boring, a Disciples scholar, points out that strong feelings of egalitarianism and distrust of leadership are common among groups that are splintering away from the traditional ones. Ulrich Luz, a German scholar, says that in the early church there was no hierarchy, there was no *archy* of any kind. *Archy* is the Greek word for rule. No rule of brothers and sisters over brothers and sisters, only reciprocal service. From Matthew’s perspective, a hierarchical church of the Catholic type or an institutional church of the Protestant type is a fundamental denial of the faith. Christ is Lord of the church. No one else has any titles—not rabbi, not father, not guide. All members of the churches are content to deacon each other.

Third Move: A Community of Character

We just celebrated the 500th anniversary of Luther’s 95 Theses. What would Jesus’ 95 Theses be today? To be even more responsive to today’s text, what virtues do Christian leaders lack today?

I am not going to address the split between mainline and evangelical churches. I think they have essentially become two separate religions. Most of us would be more comfortable worshiping in Abby or Vered’s synagogues than in First Baptist Church or in a megachurch. We have little in common with Franklin Graham and Joel Osteen.

I would like to focus on our own house, and by that I mean the mainline church. What virtues do the religious leaders of the mainline church lack? They are the ones who sit in Moses’ seat for us.

With all respect, I do not believe that hypocrisy and humility are character defects in mainline ministers. It is rare for people today to go into ministry because

they are seeking status. In the 1950's, ministry was a respected profession. Students went into seminary in their 20's, right after college, and they made ministry their life's career. Today, the average age of students entering seminary is in their 40's. It is a second career. And it is usually a second career for less money. Churches are smaller today and can't afford to pay high salaries. Most of the Disciples pastors in Oklahoma are bi-vocational. The average worship attendance in most churches is less than 75 on Sunday and churches can't afford to pay a full-time minister.

Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon in *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* say that the two qualities that are most lacking in church leaders today are truthfulness and faithfulness.

Truthfulness means observing things as they really are and reporting them to the congregation. Most Americans today, even the people in the pews, get their identity from their political party or their political ideology instead of from their religious beliefs. The members in mainline churches are about evenly divided between Republicans, Democrats and independents. Many ministers are reluctant to say anything that might be perceived as political because they don't want to alienate anyone.

Politics is about life in the *polis*, the Greek word for city or community. Aristotle argued that the primary purpose of the *polis* is the creation of people who are better than they would be without the aid of the *polis*. Hauerwas and Willimon ask, what does American society or our political parties do for us? Does it make us better people? They suggest that the ideology of American culture, both on the right and the left, is radical individualism. Society exists mainly to assist assertions of individuality. Society is formed to supply our needs, no matter what the content of those needs. Society does not help us to judge our needs, to have the right needs which we exercise in right ways. Our society becomes a vast supermarket of desire. What we call freedom becomes the tyranny of our desires. We can choose to buy a Samsung Galaxy instead of an iPhone and call that freedom.

The church becomes one more consumer-oriented organization, existing to encourage individual fulfillment rather than facilitating individual conversion into the Body of Christ. People go to churches that have the facilities and programs they want.

We have become practical atheists. We no longer believe that God gives direction to our lives. We believe instead in achievement and self-sufficiency. We trust no one but ourselves.

Hauerwas and Willimon suggest that ministers are unfailing polite, friendly and cordial. "They are cordial to a fault." They see ministry as a helping profession and they try to help their parishioners meet their unchecked, unexamined needs. There is

no clear sense of purpose other than meeting people's needs, which are virtually limitless in an affluent society. Pastors get exhausted from ministering to these needs.

What we need is clergy who will get us from one place to another. Hauerwas and Willimon are not sure clergy know where we are, much less where we ought to be. Their job description is not to be a chaplain or a therapist in a social club full of nice people. Instead they should be helping us to survive as a colony in a culture of unbelief.

Our churches should be communities of character, where people learn what it means to follow Christ and produce fruits of the spirit. Where people stop trying to write their own story and become part of God's story.

Conclusion

You are religious people or you wouldn't be here. As religious people we are drawn to morality and virtue. We are passionate about our leaders because they have a special responsibility.

Yet we cannot lay all the blame on our religious leaders. We get the leaders we deserve. What is lacking in our leaders is the same thing that is lacking in us. We all need to develop habits based on truthfulness and faithfulness. We can only build these habits in a community of character.

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