

November 5, 2017
31st Sunday in Ordinary Time
Matthew 23:1-12

1 Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to his disciples, 2 saying, "The scribes and the Pharisees have taken their seat on the chair of Moses. 3 Therefore, do and observe all things whatsoever they tell you, but do not follow their example. For they preach but they do not practice. 4 They tie up heavy burdens (hard to carry) and lay them on people's shoulders, but they will not lift a finger to move them. 5 All their works are performed to be seen. They widen their phylacteries and lengthen their tassels. 6 They love places of honor at banquets, seats of honor in synagogues, 7 greetings in marketplaces, and the salutation 'Rabbi.' 8 As for you, do not be called 'Rabbi.' You have but one teacher, and you are all brothers. 9 Call no one on earth your father; you have but one Father in heaven. 10 Do not be called 'Master'; you have but one master, the Messiah. 11 The greatest among you must be your servant. 12 Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; but whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

Background:

In last Sunday's gospel text, Jesus was asked by one of the Pharisees what is the greatest commandment. Following that text, Matthew describes an incident where Jesus asks the Pharisees a question. Jesus takes their answer and uses another passage of the Hebrew Scripture to demonstrate that their answer is not correct. The text ends, "No one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day on did anyone dare to ask him any more questions." (Matthew 22:46)

Scripture scholars believe that the hostile relationship between Jesus and the Pharisees is more representative of the community for which Matthew is writing his gospel than of Jesus' relationship with them. Some even believe that Jesus never delivered this address against the scribes and the Pharisees, but that it represents the early Christians' relationships to the Scribes and Pharisees after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in the year 70 AD. In Luke's gospel, Jesus seems to enjoy a good relationship with at least some of the Pharisees. Even here in this text, Jesus' statement that his disciples should observe the teachings of the Pharisees is a compliment. It indicates that Jesus believes the Pharisees know the Scriptures and he approves of the way they interpret them. The more critical attitude toward them is reflected in Jesus' statement that they are not to be imitated, because they do not live by their own teachings. Jesus calls them "hypocrites" (or actors) eight times in the course of Matthew's gospel.

Among the Pharisees there were those who believed every law was important and must be observed. Others taught that some laws were heavy (serious) and other were light. Verse 4 seems to play on the word "heavy" to represent the difficult task of observing faithfully all the precepts of the law. In a culture where one's worth and existence is defined by the respect of the community, some recognition is vital. Jesus' comments in verses 5-7 would be best understood as excessive seeking of esteem and recognition from the community. Even in this culture where maintaining honor and status in the community was important, there was also a sense of never wanting to appear to be expecting or wanting recognition.

Verse 8 shifts from Jesus talking about the scribes and the Pharisees to Jesus talking directly to them. Here his concern is about the use of titles. To call someone "rabbi" was a title of honor which could be translated as "my Lord." "Father" was a term of respect given to elders. In Matthew's gospel it is used only in reference to God. Jesus taught his followers to call God "Father." (Matthew 6:9) In this section of the text, Jesus is asking his followers to forgo the search for the esteem of others. Rather, they should be people who practice what they preach, lighten the burden of the law for those who are trying to be faithful to God, and prefer positions of service without status.

Reflection Questions:

1. What are the signs of status or respect that were taught in your family?

2. Are there signs of respect or status that are important to you?
3. Who are the people who hold positions of leadership in your parish or community? What would happen in your community if these people shunned all roles of honor at community gatherings?
4. In what ways do these same people display a sense of service within the community?
5. When you think about Jesus in the gospels, does the Jesus in this text add another facet to the Jesus you know from the gospels, or does this text seem to be out of character?
6. Who are the people in the church or in your community whom you think of as people who act on what they preach or believe? Do they know that you find them to be a good example?
7. Can you take some time to talk to God about Jesus' attitude toward the leadership in his day and your attitude toward leadership in your day, or whatever else arises within you as you read this gospel?

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