

“A Way to Right Living” August 19th, 2015 CHC

Psalm 40:6-8; Matthew 5:17-20

There is a Jewish story about a man who was visited by the angel of death. The angel told him that he would die in a few days. “Answer one question for me”, the man begged. “What will they ask me when I appear before the heavenly tribunal?”

“It is not for me to tell you what they will ask, but I can tell you what they will not ask. They will not ask: “Why were you not more like your neighbor?”

I find that I take my cues, consciously and unconsciously, from what is going on around me. What people are thinking, doing, the unspoken values, politically and socially, have strong influences upon my choices and lifestyle. Often these influences are positive, such as the social pressure not to smoke, to recycle, to get an education, to go to church and pursue spiritual growth among many others. However, can we devise a morality and an enduring ethic from human resources and influence alone?

It is shocking to look at old tobacco ads from the 1950's era magazines which show doctors in lab coats touting the merits of one cigarette over another. That was common practice. Why? Because then, as now, advertisers love to rely on respected members of society to sell their products. That is why big money is paid to celebrities, those who have the power to influence public opinion. I might add that we are easily influenced. Recently I watched an ad featuring a particular food product stimulating a hunger button I was unaware of and headed to the refrigerator. It is subtle and effective and occurs on multiple levels.

This text introduces us to a powerful group of leaders who sought to influence the community around Jewish law and tradition. Their piety and religious activity is impeccable. They get an 'A' for tithing, praying, giving alms to the poor, attending Temple worship, studying the Bible, and modeling appropriate behavior for a Jewish person seeking to follow God. They lived in an environment occupied by Rome, highly influenced by the social and intellectual pressure of Hellenism. They separated themselves, seeking to create a counterculture of life and faith centered about their faith in God.

The Pharisees of whom our text speaks are often demonized. You must know, however, that they were a lay movement committed to living out and teaching the laws of God and the tradition of the faith community. We have our own versions of them in our church and world. The Pharisees of Jesus' day were held in honor by most of the people, especially those desiring to live a godly life. Children who learned from them were expected to esteem them. In public favor, they were patriotic, opposed to the worldliness of the Sadducees, the moneyed, political, priestly class who collaborated with Rome. Their mission was to bring religion to the people. They were generous to the needy, modeling a lifestyle of service. We would describe them as 'good people'. They were there as reminders to those who lived and believed that the law was irrelevant to their world, that the assumptions of the Greek culture defined truth and what makes a person good.

The Apostle Paul was himself a Pharisee. Listen to his self- description; “If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law blameless” (Philippians 3:4-6).

The Scribes are often mentioned in tandem with the Pharisees. They were experts in the law and its interpretation, the lawyers, so to speak, of that culture. They expounded and interpreted the law and as jurists, administered it. The two went around together like Batman and Robin.

These are the people who actively oppose Jesus. They get under his skin. Jesus does not hide his feelings and addresses them with the most direct and combative language imaginable. “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees...” Jesus railed at them. He does so six times in Matthew 23. Jesus was to them as Obama in the eyes of Jeb Bush, Ted Cruz, or perhaps Rush Limbaugh.

In a recent conversation with Dennis Daniel, the director of one of the agencies that we support, Jesus is the Way in Rantoul, I had asked about how they deal with the challenges of mentoring the men who come to them from the prison system. He began describing a difficult situation recently with a resident who had to be dismissed. He explained all of the things that they do in order for the men to be successful. On occasion, when non-compliance occurs multiple times, a person is brought in and told that they can no longer be in the program and why. Citing a specific case, I asked him what he might say. I mention this because of the point that he made as to the why; “Your character doesn’t match up with your words”.

Let’s reflect on that in light of the words of Jesus in our text to the people gathered that day in his hearing; “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven”. Jesus certainly grabs our attention. But what is he trying to say to us?

The first concern of Jesus is about how I live. If I am a practicing Pharisee with all of the time I have logged in bible study, biblical interpretation, helping others, and trying to be a leader and model of God’s truth and living in the community, I am offended. Jesus disregards my efforts in my attempt to serve God. Or so it seems at first glance.

Here is the rub. I may be compliant with the externals but miss the essence of what it means to be a loving person. Conformity to external standards easily leads to a mindset of self-righteousness. I may even be technically right, but am I exercising love in that situation? The mistake of the scribes and Pharisees was to make life about the focus upon actions of the law’s requirement and then make elaborate specifications of what those actions are and the manner in which they are to be done

The different professions all teach ethical guidelines of competence creating a set of right practices to be followed. That is right and good. But what I have observed is that I can hide behind those practices and fail to be personable, to enter into an “I Thou” relationship with the person in front of me. Whether it is our doctor, a teacher, a pastor, a stock broker, whatever the professional relationship, I hear people

say that I want to know beyond the competence of the person that there is the human element of caring and connection.

What, then, does it look like to exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees? How do we exceed the lived obedience of these religious leaders?

First let us talk about that word righteousness. It means literally right living, with God and other people. There is a negative version we so easily identify, though. You guessed it, I'm sure. Righteousness is often associated with self-righteousness. A righteous person is one who does everything correctly, says the right things, dots the 'i's' and crosses the 't's' just so, while at the same time unable to personally connect with the person in front of them. We are made to feel put off as a person.

The scribes and Pharisees had created a veneer of behavior that made them appear righteous, relationally connected to God and the community, yet distanced from God and the community at the same time. Let's probe into Jesus' actions to find an illustration of what he might mean for our righteousness to exceed that of the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisee.

We are all familiar with the story of the woman caught in adultery. John 8 tells us that the scribes and Pharisees bring a woman to him who had been caught in adultery. The technicality of the law was on their side. The law of Moses said that such a person was to be stoned. Whatever Jesus did when he bent down and wrote on the ground must have penetrated deep into their hearts. He exposed something in their motives that caused them to walk away one by one. He then asks the woman standing before him, "Where are they? Has no one condemned you? Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again" (John 8:1-11).

Another time our friends the scribes and Pharisees accused Jesus of violating the Sabbath law when he healed a person on the Sabbath. Angry, he asks, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?" Again, he saw their hearts as hardened and it grieved him. It is about love, not law. Jesus then asks the man to stretch out his hand and heals him (Mark 3:1-6).

Another time the scribes and Pharisees accuse Jesus' disciples of plucking grain on the Sabbath, thus violating the Sabbath law. This time he pulls a story about David from the Old Testament when David entered the house of God when Abiathar was high priest and ate the bread of the Presence when he and his men were hungry. Understand, it was not lawful to do this. Only the priests could eat it. Human need and love trumps the limits of the law. He looks at them and says, "The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:23-28).

Jesus plunges into the guts of our human existence, challenging the source of all we do, our hearts. He wants our character to match our words. We all hunger to be good but often find it difficult to find the way. We are caught in ethical dilemmas, faced with choices, the legal thing to do on one hand, and what possibly might be the loving thing to do on the other. The wider church is divided on how to approach many social and ethical issues with a variance of opinions that become divisive based on how we

interpret the legalities of Scripture, issues as heated as dragging a woman caught in adultery before Jesus. We know, as the little girl in Sunday School admitted, that “a lie is an abomination to God and a very present help in times of trouble”.

What I overhear Jesus challenging us to do is to unpack what is lying deep down in our hearts. Caught in the middle of many of our ethical and moral dilemmas we are instructed by John’s understanding of Jesus’ role in the face of our penchant to live and judge others by the law; “From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:16-17).

How can Jesus’ grace and truth occupy and be given a place to operate in my life? In one sense, trying to keep the external application of the law is not wholly unlike trying to make an apple tree bear peaches by tying peaches to its branches. Jesus is aiming at the heart, changing the inner self. Wrong actions are a symptom. Getting to the source of our actions is a way of saying that we must go beyond the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. I can’t keep the law by trying to keep the law.

This is how we need to understand Jesus’ words when he tells us, “Do think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have not come to abolish but to fulfill” (Matthew 5:17). As Dallas Willard said, “The law is not the source of rightness but is the course of rightness” (The Divine Conspiracy, p.143).

Jesus exposes my heart. I realize that I cannot attain God’s standard of righteousness. I embrace the love and grace of Jesus’ righteousness, allowing Christ’s life to live in and shape the actions of my heart. He writes his law upon my heart. Jeremiah’ spells out just what God through Jesus and the inpouring of his Holy Spirit into my life accomplishes; “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people” (Jeremiah 31:33).

And so in all circumstances we ask God, “What is the loving thing to do, the grace-filled, merciful thing to do in this situation?” “How do I love in the way that you are asking me to do so?”

God’s question to me before the holy tribunal will not be, “Why were you not more like your neighbor?” I imagine it to be, “How did you allow me to show mercy, grace, and love to others through your life while on this earth?”

I leave you with this: if I live in a house of spotless beauty with everything in its place, but have not love, I am a housekeeper---not a homemaker. If I have time for waxing, polishing, and decorative achievements, but have not love, my children learn cleanliness----not godliness. Love leaves the dust in search of a child’s laughter. Love smiles at the tiny fingerprints on a newly cleaned window. Love wipes away the tears before it wipes up the spilled milk”