

“Behind the Mask”
November 5, 2017
Text: Matthew 23:1-12

Island Heights UMC, Island Heights, NJ
21st Sunday after Pentecost

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples,

"The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach.

They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.

They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long.

They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi.

But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students.

And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father--the one in heaven.

Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah.

The greatest among you will be your servant.

All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

The fur is flying now. Jesus is really getting riled up in the temple. And he has harsh words for the important people in that temple—the people who are bent on legalism and following the letter of the law. Actually, Jesus has a high regard for the law. He says,

"The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it."

He is talking about the law, the Mosaic Law, as found in the Torah. Jesus has a high regard for the law. Remember Jesus himself said, *"Do not think I have come to abolish the law or the prophets, I have come not to abolish, but to fulfill"* (Matthew 5:7)

And, so, listen to these Pharisees and scribes. What they teach is right and good. But Jesus is quick to add a caveat..."Just do as they say, not as they do." Jesus is

calling them out for what they are.

There is a righteousness that Jesus is asking for from his followers. The scribes and Pharisees are also looking for righteousness. But for them, something has faltered, gone awry, become a problem, because with the law they tie up heavy burdens and hang them from the necks of the people. And they do nothing to lighten the load. As prosecutors of the law they just keep piling things on and make it harder and harder for the people when they themselves don't even follow the law. Compare their heavy loads with what Jesus says about himself earlier in Matthew's Gospel:

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, 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."

What Is a Hypocrite?

Hypocrites! This is what Jesus is calling the scribes and Pharisees. In the next few moments after this passage Jesus lets out a few choice words right there in the temple, *"Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. You do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them! Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!* Seven time he repeats the woes; each time listing another practice they do to deprive the people of the kingdom of heaven. This is their nature; they are hypocrites. They say one thing, but do another.

Where do you find hypocrisy today? I asked the Thursday morning Bible class, and more than a few responded in unison, "In politics!" And then the second response—"In the church!" *ouch*. But yes, the top reason why younger generations have left the church is the perception that the church is hypocritical.

Hypocrisy. What exactly does it mean? Its modern meaning only came into being in the early 1700's, which is "a person who acts in contradiction to his or her stated beliefs or feelings." But in terms of the language Matthew wrote in, and certainly the world in which Jesus lived in, hypocrite is the Greek word for actor, a person who wears a mask and plays a part on the stage.

Phylacteries and Fringes

Phylacteries and fringes. You can hardly blame the scribes and the Pharisees for their attempts at piety. To wear a phylactery on the forehead or the arm would signify that scripture was so important that you would carry pieces of it around on small scrolls in these leather boxes. Inside the phylactery box would be, for instance, the Shema—*The Lord, our God is one. You shall love the Lord, our God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.* Carry it around in a phylactery on your forehead and maybe the Word of God might actually sink into your understanding. And if your prayer shawl had a longer fringe it might serve as reminder to pray without ceasing. The longer the fringe, the more devout one might be to this spiritual discipline.

But there is a problem, and Jesus spots it. He says,

"They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long."

They are just playing a part. They crave the approval of the people. They want

that respect. They want that honor and that glory. They get the best seats, the pomp and circumstance, the honorific title, the prestigious position and all the power that comes with it. But truth and integrity has gone by the wayside, and now its all costumes and masks; it's all posing and opinion. It's all phylacteries and fringes.

Our Own Hypocrisy

But it's not just the Pharisees and the scribes. In our Thursday Bible study when I asked about the hypocrites of today, after answering "politicians" and "the church" there was another, this time quieter voice who snuck in, "and it's all of us." And, oh, I think is so true. We are all works in progress, to be sure, and the Holy Spirit is working a miracle in our lives in our ongoing perfection in the love of God. But we all struggle with saying one thing, and living another.

And isn't true we all want the approval of others? We all seek after it. We strive to be recognized, accepted, and approved. We crave attention; we value fame; we want approval so much we present ourselves in ways that are not always in line with our true selves. These things matter to us. But the trap of self-promotion and the waywardness of self-importance all leads to emptiness. It's all fool's gold. Do you see the root of the issue is where we seek approval. We become approval junkies. To get the approval of people we compromise, lie, and do what ever is needed. We lose face and we put on masks that portray one thing, when behind the masks we hide our true selves. We carefully construct our false selves, which makes us hypocrites—actors who play roles other than our own.

And tragically, even when we realize it's only God's approval we need, we approach God with our masks still on. I am good, see? I am religious, right? I do good things, don't I? We might forget over time that we are even wearing a mask.

Servant Leadership

But along comes this model of servant leadership in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus, the Christ. There is no mask on this man. He is true and he is humble. He is just himself. He is the one who washes other's feet. He is the one who ensures that everyone is fed; the one who goes to the leper colonies and heals them; the one who strikes up conversations with people that everyone else ignores; the one who allows himself to be taken and destroyed so others may live. Can you see how all of the Gospel of Matthew is coming together now? All the way back at the beginning of Matthew's account we hear Jesus give the Sermon on the Mount when he lists the beatitudes one after another. *Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* And now he says,

"The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted."

Remember this in your ministries, remember this in your day-to-day lives, and remember this as you come to the Table.

Come to the Table

This is the Table of the Lord. Our time and place of Holy Communion is the best

living illustration of what a servant leader is and does. So, come to the Table. Come if you have been coming for years as if it is the first time ever. Come if you are new to this as if you have always been welcome and expected. The Table is open to everyone, so come as you are. But when you approach this meal, know that the mask comes off. Who can be sure if it is us taking it off or the gentle hands of Jesus removing it. But the good news is that God loves and wants what is behind the mask. Amen.