

Pharisaism

Sermon
Rev. Rebecca Clancy
Matthew 6:1-4

Jesus was a man of great love, but just because he was a man of great love didn't necessarily mean that he greatly *liked* everything. This entails no contradiction. Love must exist in an *unloving* world, and so love *cannot like* everything.

For instance, Jesus didn't *like* it when the sacred was profaned. "Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying there, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them, 'It is written, "My house shall be called a house of prayer"; but you are making it a den of robbers.'"

And Jesus didn't *like* it when his messianic vocation to die was repudiated. "And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.' But he turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'"

And Jesus didn't, as a rule, *like* the Pharisees. "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them," he declared in the Sermon on the Mount from which I just read, "for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others..."

And that wasn't an end to the matter. It was only a beginning, "And whenever you pray," he continued, "do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others....And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting."

And the Sermon on the Mount constitutes a mere slap on the wrist compared to his blistering condemnation of the Pharisees upon his arrival in Jerusalem: "They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others....They do all their deeds to be seen by others.... They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in synagogues..."

And then he *really* got going. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven...For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.... Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!You tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: Justice and mercy and faith... You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel! Woe to you... You are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful but inside are full of the bones of the dead and filth... You snakes, you brood of vipers. How can you escape being sentenced to hell?" Yes, I think it's fair to say that Jesus, as a rule, didn't like the Pharisees.

But why not? It's easy enough to understand why he disliked the sacred being profaned. It was to blaspheme his father. And it's easy enough to understand his disliked the repudiation of his messianic vocation to die. It was to jeopardize his mission. But why did he dislike the Pharisees? After all, they were the religious elites of their day.

The very word Pharisee meant separated. The Pharisees separated themselves from larger society in order to devote themselves to the Law, and devote themselves they did. Not only did they adhere to the Torah -- the Ten Commandments and the 613 laws that followed them, but they adhered also to the Oral Torah, a massive proliferation of laws that applied the Torah in scrupulous and meticulous detail to every conceivable aspect of daily living. What exception could Jesus take to this zeal, this fervor?

Jesus disliked the Pharisees because they overlooked something -- something key, something central. They overlooked that the Law, like everything else under human influence was, as the apostle Paul declared in this morning's epistle lesson, "under the power of sin." The Pharisees *exempted* the law from sin and in their adherence to it believed *themselves exempt* from sin. This in turn made them self-righteous and in their self righteousness they deemed themselves to be *standard setters*. Religion then was for them about the setting of standards -- standards they deemed themselves to embody -- over against others.

This is why Jesus disliked the Pharisees. Jesus, who inspired Paul, would have agreed with him -- and with Peter and John and the whole biblical witness for that matter -- that everything under human influence was “under the power of sin.” And so Jesus wasn’t much for one particular set of sinners setting standards over against others. This is why he called them hypocrites.

Historians will tell you that the Pharisees eventually found their way into synagogues and became Rabbis -- teachers of the Law. Maybe in a sense this is true, but in a sense it isn’t. I know many rabbis, and they aren’t like the Pharisees one bit. Obviously a metamorphosis took place. Pharisees relate to Rabbis then like a caterpillar relates to a butterfly. They may be on a continuum, but they’re different animals.

The Pharisees, in a truer sense, eventually found their way somewhere else. *They found their way into the Christian church.* They have been there from the very beginning and in numbers sufficient to leaven the whole loaf. In fact, I think that when most people think of Christians today, in fact they are thinking of these latter day Pharisees -- those who believe that religion is about the setting of standards -- and again standards they deem themselves to embody -- over against others.

We all have encountered these latter day Pharisees: They believe that *their* interpretation of scripture is inerrant; but everybody else’s is not. They believe that *their* orientation has been ordained and sanctioned by God, but everyone else’s has not. They believe that *their*

conversion experience is legitimate, but everyone else's is not. They believe that *their* politics are those of the Kingdom of God, but everyone else's are not, etc., etc., etc.

But if Jesus didn't like Pharisees then, it's fairly safe to assume that he doesn't like them now. And the reason remains that he isn't much for one particular set of sinners setting standards over against others.

The lesson is clear: We who make bold to call ourselves his disciples must not be standard setters over against others. But if not, then what must we be? It's not terribly hard to deduce. If we are all "under the power of sin," then we are all those for whom he died. We must then be humble, grateful, non-judgmental, supportive, sympathetic, understanding, forgiving, and inclusive. This is what we must be. And from there it's not terribly hard to deduce what we must *do*: We must *repossess* all those whom the latter day Pharisees have *dispossessed*.

Could a man of such great love possibly want anything less? Amen.