

What Do You Want to Be When You Grow Up?

Matthew 23:1-12

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When I was a child, there was one side of my family I didn't see very often. In fact, I really only saw them once a year...at Thanksgiving. We would get together for the delicious spectacle that is Thanksgiving, which included my great uncle's homemade ice cream, and we would eat. I was the youngest child on that side of the family, in fact, often, my brother and I were the only children at the gathering. The adults enjoyed visiting and catching up on what was going on with their jobs and who had talked to which absent relative most recently. Of course, they tried to include me in their conversations.

*Every year, without fail, the one question I was asked was, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" As I got older, I anticipated the question as we traveled all the way up to Moline, IL. As the years went by, it was obvious to me, I had no idea what I wanted to be when I grew up, for my answer to my relatives changed every single year. How about you?

As a child, what did you want to be when you grew up?

For me, and it sounds like for you too, what I wanted to be when I grew up had a lot to do with who and what was important to me at the time. I wanted to be a nurse when I was in 3rd grade because I had my tonsils out and I wanted to be like the nurses who brought me orange popsicles when I woke up from surgery. I wanted to be a teacher when I was in 4th grade because I wanted to be like Mrs. Baird who read Laura Ingalls Wilder books to us every day after lunch. And the list goes on. As adults, we continue to be influenced by community and church leaders,

world leaders, and others who model the characteristics we value. Today's text reminds us of the role and responsibilities that leaders, in this case religious leaders, have relative to the ones in their care and who look to them for guidance.

*And it reminds us that the "walking humbly" part of Micah 6:8, that seems to be all over on t-shirts, wall hangings, and even the bracelet I wear every Sunday, may be the most difficult part of all.

3Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, 2'The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; 3therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. 4They 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. 5They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. 6They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, 7and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, and to have people call them rabbi. 8But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students.* 9And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. 10Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah.* 11The greatest among you will be your servant. 12All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

Here in chapter 23 of Matthew, the ongoing conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees comes to a head. The excited, hopeful crowds that greeted Jesus as he entered Jerusalem have given way to one negative encounter after another with religious leaders. In order to understand this tension, we have to understand a couple of things about this first century Palestinian context. First, it was home to four main "brands" of Judaism. Let me very briefly and as succinctly as I can tell you what the differences between the 4 were. Probably the most familiar to you...the

Pharisees placed great importance on the interpretation and observance of Mosaic Law as it applied to all aspects of Jewish life. The Sadducees concerned themselves with activities in and around the temple. The Jewish high priests were usually chosen from among the Sadducees. This group was also perceived as in cahoots with the Romans. The Essenes were a group who had pretty much distanced themselves from the others. They lived in the desert near Qumran and basically felt that the rest of the Jews had strayed too far from “authentic Judaism.” And last, the Zealots, who were primarily focused on overthrowing the Roman government, even using force.

And the second thing that’s important to understand about the context of this text is, of these four groups, the only ones who survived the Jewish revolt, that ended in the destruction of the temple in 70 CE, were the Pharisees. The Gospel of Matthew was written after 70 CE, when the primary opposition to the author’s Christian community were the Pharisees. If you ever wondered why the Pharisees appear so frequently in Matthew or why they are represented so negatively in the narrative, there’s your reason. When Matthew was being written, the Pharisees were being difficult. Perhaps surprisingly, though, in the story, Jesus began this discourse with an admonishment to the crowds and the disciples to listen to what the Pharisees were teaching and to obey the teaching. Jesus’ problem with the Pharisees wasn’t that they didn’t know the law or how to apply it.

*The problem, we learn in verse 3, is that they did not practice what they taught.

The Pharisees misused their authority. They behaved in ways that were counter to the truth they knew, the truth they taught. They talked about orienting their entire lives toward God, yet they did things to draw the people’s attention to themselves. One example of that is highlighted in verse 5 when Jesus talked about the Pharisees’ broad phylacteries and long fringes. Phylacteries were leather boxes,

containing little pieces of parchment with scripture written on them. They were strapped to their arms and foreheads. The Pharisees had made a habit of making their phylacteries larger than was common or necessary. And the comment about the long fringe was the same idea. The law required fringe on their garment and so they made theirs extra long. In other words, everybody look at me. I'm really religious!

*In addition, as leaders, they were supposed to be responsible for the well-being of the people, yet, according to verse 4, they were "unwilling to lift a finger" to unburden them. Jesus was pointing out that they were hypocrites. This kind of hypocrisy isn't limited to Judaism, though. Hypocrisy seems to be embedded in our nature as human beings.

In our passage today, we see two kinds of hypocrisy. The first, speaks one thing and does another; the second does the right thing for the wrong reasons. We've all done it. I've stood right here in this pulpit and preached to you about the importance of Sabbath observance, while I have been in the middle of a month long stretch without a day off. And I've done good things for the wrong reasons. I've volunteered to offer the prayer at the city council meeting, not so much because I wanted to draw the members of the council closer to God, but because I wanted them to hear in my prayer what I believe should guide their decisions. Honestly, as I think about my own habits, especially my spending habits, it isn't hard to come up with examples of hypocrisy. I believe how we spend our money tells a story. I know the coffee industry is full of injustice, yet, since moving (almost a year ago) I have still not restarted my autoship for fair trade coffee. I could spend a lot of time listing all the ways I see myself as a hypocrite. I will stop here and remind you that I preach what I need to hear too. And not to excuse my own hypocrisy, I do think it is a rare human being who does not struggle with "do as I say, not as I do."

Because of this, I think when we run across people who "practice what they preach", who truly live what they say they believe, we recognize it,

we are drawn to them, and we never forget them. These people, unintentionally on their part, become our role models, the ones about whom we say, “I want to be like him/her when I grow up.” After all, I’ve never heard anyone say, “I want to be like him because he says one thing and does another, or because I never know, from one day to the next, what he really believes is right.” The people we aspire to be like show us again and again what they believe by what they do. They put the burdens of others ahead of their own. They sacrifice themselves for the well-being of others, sometimes the well-being of us.

One of the people I want to be like “when I grow up” is Rev. Dr. Lisa Davison. She is the Hebrew Bible professor at Phillips Theological Seminary. She taught me to love the Hebrew Bible and the Hebrew language. She was my academic advisor when I was at Phillips. She was the one who listened while I sorted out my shifting theology, celebrated the ah-ha moments of seminary with me, talked me down off of the end of semester ledges, and reminded me over and over that what we believe about God and human beings matters in the world today. She demonstrated to me what it means to be a public theologian and to use my voice, backed by solid biblical scholarship, to stand with the ones who are most vulnerable. I thought about her this week when I saw in the news that a law professor at Tulsa University apologized for “unleashing on the unsuspecting public,” his former student, who is now working in our federal government. I thought about what it would feel like to have Dr. Davison say that about me. I think I would be devastated. And I would know I had gotten something very wrong.

Now that you are an adult, who do you aspire to be like “when you grow up?”

It seems that for all of us, we aspire to be like the ones who have spoken to the best in us. They have inspired us to be better, to do better. For some of us, our role models have seen us through or

physically walked with us during the dark times in our lives. We remember what they said or did and it helps us pull ourselves together for the next part of the journey.

*I love what Albert Schweitzer wrote, "Sometimes our light goes out but is blown into flame by another human being. Each of us owes deepest thanks to those who have rekindled this light."

Today, we take time to remember the saints in our lives, who have used their light to rekindle the light within us in times of darkness and uncertainty. Undoubtedly, some of those dear ones have died, some live across the country or even on the other side of the world, some may be in this room, or maybe living in your home. Today we are thankful for the ones who thought more of us than they did of themselves, who took time to teach us, talk with us, and show us, through their actions, that they were truly who we thought they were. We thank them for always pointing us to God's love, knowing that there is nothing else that is permanent. And we continue to be inspired to be just like them, when we grow up.

*Let me end this morning with this, written by artist and author Jan Richardson, whose artwork we enjoy this morning on the cover of our bulletin:

For Those Who Walked With Us

For those
who walked with us,
this is a prayer.

For those
who have gone ahead,
this is a blessing.

For those
who touched and tended us,
who lingered with us

while they lived,
this is a thanksgiving.
For those
who journey still with us
in the shadows of awareness,
in the crevices of memory,
in the landscape of our dreams,
this is a benediction. Amen.