

TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Joshua 3:7-17, Psalm 107:1-7, 33-37; 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13; Matthew 23:1-12

There are two questions that would be helpful for us to ask ourselves when reading the Bible. First, by asking, “What’s going on here?” encourages us to dig a little deeper, to see if we can get a better understanding of the passage we are reading.

The second question is “What does that mean for us?” is often more difficult, because, it forces us to consider our own ways of thinking and acting in light of the Gospel values.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus is having another one of his run-ins with the Pharisees. Many Christians see the Pharisees as the “bad guys”, but this is not true. The Pharisees were a group of very devout Jews who put great emphasis on their beliefs and adapted the practices of the prophets to their own times. They sought to make the love of God and love of neighbor, the two greatest Commandments, the main focus of the Torah, from which all else flowed.

That sounds quite a bit like the focus of Jesus, Himself, doesn’t it? The Pharisees were very concerned about preserving their Jewish religious and cultural life in the midst of Greek Roman society, and so they focused on the laws concerning food, purity, and group practices. These practices served to keep the Jewish people united to one another and separate from the society of the Gentiles.

Many Pharisees of Jesus’ time went one step further to make their way of life even more distinctive. They drew on an old tradition of using the priestly laws concerning purity, food, and

marriage for all Jews, not just for the priests. These purity regulations, which may seem mysterious and strange to us today, regulated life and separated what was normal and life-giving, from that which was abnormal or not acceptable. The Pharisees, who Jesus contended with, attempted to keep themselves in a state of purity at all times, the same as a priest in the Temple.

They were very attentive to their behavior and took great care not to come in contact with anything considered impure or defiled.

The Gentiles presented a danger to keeping themselves pure, but another danger to purity was the presence of the ordinary people who had neither the time, money, nor interest in keeping the priestly laws of purity. They were unable to tithe properly and what little food they had, was not properly prepared and could not be eaten by the Pharisees. The people of the land were poor and lived a meager existence; they were probably too busy trying to keep food on the table to worry about what kind of food it was, and if it had been properly prepared.

Jews who keep these dietary laws today, do so as a spiritual practice. They may be inconvenient at times, but they are not a burden to them. Like these spiritual disciplines, we might practice daily prayer, fasting or abstaining from certain foods that are hazardous to our health and prevent us living according to our principles.

In today's Gospel, Jesus is not criticizing those who try faithfully to keep the Law. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus speaks of the Torah as good and God-given. Here he is speaking about those who forget what really mattered: loving God and loving your neighbor. Jesus is speaking about the big things: justice, mercy and faithfulness. He is speaking to the experts, the ones who were so good at telling other people what they should

be doing. He is also speaking to those who work really hard at keeping the letter of the law, while forgetting about the spirit of the law.

Some biblical commentators believe that generations of preachers have used this passage to criticize church leaders who like to “dress up” to impress others. It might even be a fair comment.

But this passage is about more than fancy clothes and good seats. Jesus criticized the Pharisees because they didn’t practice what they preached; their lives did not reflect the law that they continually debated; they didn’t live out what they taught.

While Jesus’ rebuke seems general, as though all scribes and Pharisees were guilty of love of place and honor, we know the rabbis themselves condemned such behavior. We know that leaders of every generation in Judaism, the early church, the church through the ages, and the church today, have not lived out their vocations in accordance with the values of the Gospel.

So the real audience is not the Pharisees, but the disciples and, by extension, us; Jesus is talking to his church and especially to its leaders.

Remember who it is that is speaking in our Gospel lesson. It is Christ Jesus, who, as we read in Philippians, “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.”

Remember also, that Jesus is in Jerusalem. It is the Tuesday following Palm Sunday. He has returned to the Temple after casting out the animal buyers and sellers and overturning the tables of the money changers. He must have known that his time was short, that confrontation was ahead. He has just a little time left to teach his disciples, to help them to practice what they will preach.

Kathleen Norris, in her book, *The Cloister Walk*, writes of the

connection between monastic practice and the discipline of writing. After giving a poetry reading to a community of Trappists, she writes: “I told the monks that I had come to see both writing and monasticism as vocations that require periods of apprenticeship and formation. Prodigies are common in mathematics, but extremely rare in literature, and, I add, ‘As far as I know, there are no prodigies in monastic life.’”

We know from our life in the Christian community, that this is true, not just for monastics or writers, but for all of us. There are no prodigies in the Christian life; all of us are apprentices; all of us are in need of conversion; all of us require formation.

That’s why we come together, week by week, to be nourished by word and sacrament. That’s why we have preaching and teaching. That’s why we gather together as a community of faith. We are not prodigies, we are fellow travelers on the journey of faith. We are here to help each other, for we all journey together.

AMEN.