**“Big Phylacteries or Blessed to be a Blessing?”**

November 1, 2020. Rev. Pat Weatherwax

**Matthew 23:1-12 NRSV** from the gospel according to Saint Matthew

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.

Holy words, holy wisdom, thanks be to God

**INTRODUCTION**

I encourage you to read and re-read this passage. There is an important message, well several, for us; too much for one sermon….

First, we note that this account is not in other gospels. Matthew’s edition of the gospel is especially about connections to Judaism, for instructing the Jewish converts to Christianity. In a roundabout way, this passage is for them to understand *grace.*

But, a bit about that unusual word. What are Phylacteries?

**PHYLACTERIES**

If you have never dealt with this text, you might want to go to JewishEncyclopedia.com for many more details than I can explain about phylacteries. Wikipedia won’t do. You might actually enjoy reading about the right way to put on your phylactery! It’s quite a process, spiritually and technically - with fascinating details and explanations. You need a visual, because you probably never saw anyone in Battle Creek wearing a phylactery or a tefillin (“pronounced TeeFILLin”).

But you may know the scriptures that brought these into use. From Exodus 13:16: “It shall serve as a sign on your hand and as an emblem on your forehead that by strength of hand, the Lord brought us out of Egypt.”

And from Deuteronomy 6:5-9, one that I know we’ve shared several times: called the Shema’-means “Listen up, people!” Here are important faith practices for God’s people, throughout all ages!

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. Deut 6:5-9,

This is a commandment from God given through Moses, handed down through the rabbis and families and the Pharisees who especially loved commandments. The question is, was it to be taken literally or figuratively?? The Jewish people for centuries, before the time of Jesus and since, were or are following this literally. Not a bad thing. Obviously, anyone wearing these would be more mindful of their behavior- and so would not engage in behaviors that would be disrespectful or against any of the commandments. Originally tefillin were worn all day. Now orthodox Jewish people wear them during the daily morning prayer service, only. So, you generally don’t see them in public, except maybe around an orthodox synagogue.

Matthew’s gospel is making this point: Jesus thought the rules, the required ways of *demonstrating* your faith, had gotten to be too important. The laws were figurative burdens on the backs of people, too heavy to manage. And the Pharisees were adding to the burden, not helping to ease them.

Paul, who was once a Pharisee, stressed this continuously in his New Testament writings: God’s grace is sufficient (2 Corinthians 12:9, Romans 11:6). Our works, our apparel, our religious rituals, do not make us right in God’s eyes. Romans 3: “For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are now justified by his grace as a gift that is in Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:22b-24).

**BIG PHYLACTERIES**

My intent is not to downplay faithful faith practices. But *why* is your faith demonstrated? Is it to look good in the eyes of others, outwardly, or to be connected with God inwardly? Jesus’ challenged the motive of wearing “broad phylacteries”. When things are for show, the bigger the better, right? Let’s show just how serious we are about God, by our religiosity!?

Brian, was one of my buds, my peer during my Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE- chaplain training) experience. There were 4 of us in our group, and Brian was the youngest, and the least tainted by a first career and life experiences. Brian wore a large wooden cross necklace, that apparently, when he got it, he vowed to wear it, *always*. Again, not to disparage faithful practices. I have a variety of cross necklaces that I wear. But Brian’s was not your typical cross. It was huge. It covered his chest. He loved wearing it because he felt it was honoring his faith and Jesus. We know- we are “not to be ashamed of the gospel” (2 Timothy 1:12).

For several months Brian wore the cross every day. We *might* have told him it was excessive. The rest of us certainly weren’t going to join him in this demonstration of faith. I know this passage and others about public displays of faith crossed my mind, and we teased him a bit.

Then, one day we literally gasped as he walked into our morning report without his cross on. It had broken, as he took it off the night before. He never replaced it and I think we were all relieved. He’s a pastor and chaplain in upstate New York now, and pastors there usually wear clerical collars, so he still boldly proclaims his allegiance to Christ. (I’m kind of glad that’s not as typical here.)

So *do* we honor God when we publicly demonstrate our faith? Are we showing off or are we totally aware, as Jeff reminded us in his final sermon, that humility demonstrates true faith. That humble awareness of God’s constant grace and abiding love reminds us-- we are blessed.

**BLESSED**

God has always blessed people. God spoke to Abraham: “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:2-3).

Maybe we don’t always feel like our lives are blessed by God. But here’s the truth, we don’t know what life would be without the love of God surrounding us. We’ve never known a world without it. Bill Gaither used to sing:

“We are so blessed by the things You have done

The victories we've won and what You've brought us through

We are so blessed, take what we have to bring

Take it all, everything, Lord, we bring it to You”

**BLESSED TO BE A BLESSING**

Humble living and giving- knowing we have been blessed. Knowing Jesus doesn’t want *displays* of piety. God asks us to ***be*** a blessing, following Jesus’ example of humility: From the Gospel according to John:

Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. ...

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them (John 13:3-5, 12-17).

It’s time to be reminded again, of the humility of Christ, the blessing of the sacrament, the gifts of God for the people of God.

You are blessed. Be a blessing.