

PENTECOST XX

The greatest among you will be your servant, and all who humble themselves will be exalted. Matthew 23:12

What's wrong with the scribes and the Pharisees? Why is Jesus always on their case? Why does he use them as negative models in episode after episode?

To understand this, we'd first better understand just who the scribes and Pharisees are, in particular. *In the 1st century, scribes and Pharisees were two largely distinct groups, though presumably some scribes were Pharisees. Scribes had knowledge of the law and could draft legal documents (contracts for marriage, divorce, loans, inheritance, mortgages, the sale of land, and the like). Every village had at least one scribe. Pharisees were members of a party that believed in resurrection and in following legal traditions that were ascribed not to the Bible but to "the traditions of the fathers." Like the scribes, they were also well-known legal experts: hence the partial overlap of membership of the two. (Encyclopedia Britannica)*

Jesus objects to the scribes and Pharisees for a number of reasons. One, they multiply rules and the demands of the law until their minute interpretations become an impossible burden for common people, but the leaders don't bear those burdens themselves or help others bear them. *(They tie up heavy burdens... and lay them on the shoulders of others; but ...are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.)* They resemble, in their own way, the fat cats and proponents of regressive taxes that Occupy Wall Street objects to. There's a enormous gap between leaders and people, fortunate and

unfortunate, the same kind of gap we keep reading and hearing about these days: the one percent and the ninety-nine.

Second, the religious authorities are ostentatious and proud. (*They love to have the place of honor at banquets, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplace.*) They show off their badges of religiosity everywhere, and expect to be revered and deferred to not only in the synagogue but in the social scene. They enjoy the perks of their positions. If they'd had stretch limos or Lexuses in the first century, they'd be driving them. Think of the religious leaders today who succumb to the tem

And third, Jesus says, they crave titles, honorifics: rabbi, father, and instructor. They want to be set apart by name. Jesus' point is that God is the Father, God is the teacher, and he is God's spokesperson. I've always resisted titles, as I resist wearing the clerical collar. I don't want to be called Mother, or Doctor, or Reverend, never have, and when people feel the need to address me with a title, I always wonder where that need comes from. Jesus has the same attitude. *Why do you call me rabbi?* he asks the disciples at one point. *Call me friend*, he tells them.

Call me friend.

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

You know, you could all be at Trinity Church in Copley Square right now. You could. It's a simple trip on the Orange Line, or, I think they have validated parking right across Clarendon St from the church.

The building would not be in need of repointing. Plaster would not be falling off the narthex walls, and water would not be puddling on the narthex

floor or in the basement (although I have to say, right after Trinity had completed their luxurious basement renovation, I noticed, with sinful glee, a leak in a wall.)

Not only that, you could be anonymous. The place is huge; you could sit quietly in your pew and no one would ask you to do anything. Maybe ever.

I'm not suggesting you go to Trinity; I'd hate it if anyone took this as a serious idea and left St. John's. I'm just saying: it might be so much easier.

So why are we here? Why are we all here, with our decrepit building and our short handedness? *Call me friend*, Jesus says. I think we are here because we call each other friends, and if we have the intimacy of friends with Jesus it's not because of elegant formal liturgy or wealth and connections. Remember, Jesus tells the rich young man to sell all his possessions and give the money to the poor if the guy wants to follow him, to be his friend.

I was talking to Mark Richardson, Georgia's husband, at the Progressive Dinner last week. Mark teaches high school in Brockton. "I have the best job in the world," he told me. "I'll fight you for that," I said. He said that occasionally friends and colleagues will suggest that he move to a ritzy suburb, with more resources. I told him that early on, various mentors of mine had suggested the same thing, when I first came to St. John's. "You don't have to stay there long," they told me. "But I'm needed more where I am," said Mark. "Me too," I agreed.

One among us who did the reverse of what I imagined early, who came from Trinity to St. John's, told me, "I want to be somewhere where my

time and money make a difference.” And man, do they ever!

All our time and all our money make a difference. You know, everyone in this congregation could go to Trinity for a few weeks, and then leave, and our departure might not even be noticed. Here, whenever one of us leaves we notice, and are sad. Sad not first and foremost because we need everyone we have, and more. Sad because a friend is leaving, is moving on in life for one reason or another. We call each other friends, we notice and mourn when a friend is no longer with us.

St. John's: Our Home, our Church, our Future. I hope we all feel the truth of these words, feel them deeply in our hearts. And I pray, when you are called upon soon to make your annual pledge to St John's, that you will remember how much you are needed, and give as generously as possible of your time, talent, and treasure.

Many of you give sacrificially already. You are not like the scribes and the Pharisees, who do not practice what they preach. They lack consistency and wholeness, they lack integrity. That cannot be said of you faithful here at St. John's. We may be humble, but we are faithful, and we find our reward in the glimpses and foreshadowings of heaven we find in this beloved, loving, community.

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Alleluia! Amen