

# SERMON

by Rev. Emily Chapman

October 30, 2011

*(Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A)*

8:30 a.m. Service of Word and Table



## ST. PAUL'S

### UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

5501 Main Street

Houston, Texas 77004-6917

713-528-0527

[www.stpaulshouston.org](http://www.stpaulshouston.org)

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

## **Matthew 23:1-12**

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

If I ever gave my sermons titles, I would call this one “In Defense of Hypocrisy.” We have a tough passage from Matthew today in which Jesus condemns those who do not practice what they teach. I can assure you it is a frightening text for a preacher.

But before we can get into why hypocrisy might not be so bad, we need a little history lesson. Imagine you’re living in a country that is suddenly occupied by a foreign government that is now making all the laws, collecting all the taxes, building an army, totally running the show. This is what the Jewish people faced in Jesus’ time. Jews had their traditions and their purity codes so they might be holy, but they now lived among the Romans. The Romans controlled everything, so if you wanted to practice your faith or have any chance of living the life to which you were accustomed, you had just a couple of options.

One group, the Zealots, decided that what was needed was to overthrow the Romans and change the government so that the people could practice their own faith and have a pure society.

Another group, called the Essenes, decided that the only way to be holy in such a situation was to withdraw and create pure communities.

But there was one more option – one that was perhaps less extreme than the other two. Jews had a holy land, the land of Israel, and within that land were holy places, the highest being the Temple in Jerusalem. They also had holy times from weekly Sabbath to major festivals. They had holy persons, arranged in a hierarchy, with their priests at the top. And they had holy things related mostly to food and cleanliness. It was practically and economically impossible for the common people, especially those who worked on the land, to keep these purity codes. Under Roman rule, the common people could not be holy. The Pharisees wanted to come up with a way for everyone, for all the common people, to observe the laws and purity codes by studying them and reinterpreting them in ways that were applicable to the situation. You can only understand the Pharisees when you realize that they were trying to restore Israel's relationship with God by bringing the whole people of Israel, everyone, to purity and therefore holiness. They were providing an alternative to the total withdrawal of the Essenes and violent restorationism of the Zealots that sought to bring Israel back to God.

That quick history lesson leads us to this important truth from our Gospel lesson today. The Pharisees' project was not all that different than Jesus'. In many ways they want the same thing. But Jesus is so critical of them because they aren't, as the scripture says, practicing what they teach. The real interest isn't in actual holiness for all the people but in how they look.

This is an interesting text given that today is Reformation Sunday. While we do not celebrate this day with quite the gusto of some of our other Protestant brothers and sisters, it is still a day that we like to celebrate the Protestant Reformation, so we remember that time in the history of the Church, that the Reformation was about the Bible entering the hands of common people, about the church being for

all people and not just the clergy, about salvation being made more easily available, to put it crudely.

But the Reformation made an error that we might be tempted to continue. The reformers took this passage directly from Matthew and applied it to the Catholic Church. Many of the sins the reformers were fleeing in the Catholic church are alive and well in the Protestant church. The way to understand the words of Jesus is that they are talking about us. We are the Pharisees. It's almost always dangerous to take a piece of scripture and say that it applies to everyone but you. This one is for all of us. This text is a call for all churches to repent of the sins that are still alive in us...especially the sin of hypocrisy.

This passage in particular repeatedly calls the Pharisees "hypocrites" in order to denounce them. It's still a word we use when we want to denounce and dismiss someone. People today are called hypocrites all the time. But hypocrisy may not be as bad as we think. There's one kind of hypocrisy where you intend to do the right thing and may even think you are doing that thing but actually end up doing the wrong thing, and therefore say one thing and do another. This is the kind of hypocrisy I think we should defend. It is the least bad sin. Because at least you're trying. You're knee-deep in self-deception, of course, as all of us are. But by describing what you believe is right, you are making yourself accountable to people, and sometimes you will end up doing the right thing if for no other reason than you don't want to be humiliated in front of them.

I defend this kind of hypocrisy because the alternative isn't usually pure, unspoiled righteousness. Instead it's another kind of hypocrisy, which is knowing you're doing the wrong thing while still mouthing the language of righteousness. That's not really hypocrisy at all — it's cynicism. The reason why I say hypocrisy is the least bad sin is that it's way better than cynicism. The hypocrite is at least trying. The cynic isn't even trying.

It is especially trendy these days to try to make hypocrisy the worst thing in the world, an unforgivable sin. The newspapers and especially the cable news shows like nothing more than to find a leader who has said one thing and turns out not to

have lived up to his or her principles. But the result of setting the wolves on the hypocrites is that no one ever wants to commit publicly to any kind of principles at all, for fear of being discovered to be a sinner, or, God forbid, a human being. Hypocrisy is a risk we take every time we try to commit ourselves to good ways to live.

It is a major risk for the church, which is meant to be holy, but is, lo and behold, full of hypocrites. The reason I hear more often than anything else for why people don't come to church is because "it's full of hypocrites." My response to this is nearly always "of course it is." Someone in my Bible study this week reminded us that the church is not supposed to be a museum for saints but a hospital for sinners. That said, we know that hypocrisy damages the witness of the Church, which might be why Jesus condemns the Pharisees so harshly. They are to be leaders and examples and are so caught up in themselves they have lost sight of that and care more about their own status than the holiness of the people.

Jesus' words about the cynicism of some of the Pharisees are challenging and hard to hear if we read them the way we ought to — as though they really apply to us. But let's not let them make us so scared of being called a hypocrite that we don't even try to be good. Part of being good is about striving to live up to standard patterns of life, and if we never tell anyone else what these are we are prisoners of our own self-deception. The other part of being good is having the grace to recognize we're trying and when we need to try again — about recognizing we have been wrong, have hurt ourselves, others and God, and that we need forgiveness and a new start. If all you're worried about is being called a hypocrite you never discover these things that are essential to Christian life and understanding God's grace.

Our church is to be a place of that grace, of the honesty and humility that the Gospel calls for this morning, so that we try to be faithful together and can help each other when we do the wrong thing. So then the next time someone says "the church is just a bunch of hypocrites," we can reply "at least we're trying."