

“Pharisee Busters”
Matthew 23:1-12
October 30, 2011

Let's start with something controversial this morning! Do you think Jesus would have frowned upon Halloween festivities? Would he have taken the Temple Youth Fellowship to a good 'Christian' Hell House instead of a local Civitan haunted house? Would he have sung praise choruses at Hallelujah night instead of carving a pumpkin with the touch of the master's hand? Would he have turned off his porch lights and ignored the trick-or-treaters instead of greeting the children with chocolate bars and bubble gum? Well, the Gospels suggest that Jesus loved celebrations and he loved to eat, so chances are that he would have loved candy corn as much as the next guy and would have shared it, too. He would have had the best candy on the block. He would have taken such delight in seeing children growing in their confidence as they turn into little princesses and lady bugs and miniature super heroes. Jesus might have even worn a costume himself - there had to be times when he wished he could be incognito— like when you go to the grocery store in your sweats and your cap and you hope nobody recognizes you. Jesus was human, and surely he, too, had days when all he wanted was to go to the well for a drink of water or walk through town alone with his thoughts - but no matter how far down he pulled the cap, people recognized him. The lepers whose rotting skin made them look like Nightmare on Elm Street came to him every day. The blind called out to him when he was in a hurry to be somewhere else. The lame were lowered in through the ceiling when the line of people waiting for his touch wound around the house. The hungry stood with open hands, and the tax collectors and hookers just wanted to talk – to feel worth something. They were relentless. He served them all. The Son of God went out of his way to serve them all.

It might have looked something like this. Opening scene: Jesus is in Jerusalem with his disciples. They have just answered exhausting questions about taxes and the resurrection and the greatest commandment, and all the while, being tested and schemed against...wouldn't it be nice to slip into the temple anonymously, plop down in the back pew and let someone else do the talking for a change? But people recognized Jesus, and the place was packed. In fact, maybe there was an old guy back there eying that back pew, trying to find a place to sit. Jesus would notice someone like that. He would motion for him to come up front and sit next to him. Maybe there was a widow – still tearful, still wearing her funeral clothes. Jesus would notice someone like that. He would listen to her story again and again. Maybe there was a small child waving her arms in the air for Jesus to hold her. Jesus would notice someone like that, and he would pick her up and place her on his lap. Jesus would notice everybody - looking into the eyes of each person in the crowd, as though he knew every one of them personally. He would notice that group of sourpusses, excuse me, Pharisees and scribes standing off to the side with their extravagant robes and long tassels. The fringes were like a rosary; they were held and counted to keep track of the various prayers. Phylacteries, which I will say only once, and which I was very careful saying that time, were small leather boxes containing portions of the scripture that were worn on the forehead. Several years ago, a Jewish man came to talk with us about the Jewish faith and he showed us exactly what these were. You put these on, and it clear that you are very religious. So, there they are – Jesus, the crowd, and the religious people.

Jesus began to teach. “All of us need to take seriously the directions of scripture.” The scribes and the Pharisees liked that part – gave Jesus a “Preach it, brother!” Hearing Jesus defend the tradition like that was a real treat...but then Jesus threw in the trick, “All of us need to

take seriously the directions of scripture...especially the scribes and Pharisees. Yeah, the ones in the robes. They make you carry their weight – they expect you to live up to their ideals—no candy, no costume, no change - ever...ideals that are a good fit for their stiff, judgmental lives. You don't have to be like that. Don't see yourself as more important than others. Don't try to be better at religion than others. Don't assess yourselves as more reasonable, more honest, more sincere than others. Don't take others as problems to be solved or tasks to be completed for your next spiritual merit badge. The least, last and lost are first, and most found in the Kingdom."

The obvious tension for a minister preaching this story is that as a preacher I wear a robe every Sunday. I love my pulpit robe – it keeps me warm, and I love my stylish seasonal stoles. I love the reserved parking for clergy at the hospitals. I love pastor appreciation month, which by the way, only has one day left! I have no doubt that Jesus is talking about me and my kind. You have to decide for yourself, but I suspect that Jesus is also talking about you and your kind.

When we read the stories of Jesus, it is a good and healthy thing to occasionally put ourselves not on his side but on the side of the group that he is fussing about. All of us, if we are honest, have an inner Pharisee. Have you heard the term inner child? It means that part of our psyche that carries childhood memories and experiences and occasionally jumps out to startle our adult lives. Well, same concept with the inner Pharisee – it's that part of our psyche that jumps out with the tassels and the robes every now and again and parades them down the street. We want our lives to count, to leave our mark, to be recognized for something good! But, when how we are recognized becomes more important than how we really are, there's a problem. Pastor Michael Hartwig of Indiana, tells about visiting a man in a nursing home who had been instrumental in starting the major industry in town. When he died, Hartwig was asked to do the funeral service. He was nervous because he knew their church would be packed. The service went well, and on the way to the cemetery he began to turn in his Bible to the passage he was to read at the grave side. While he was turning to I Corinthians 15, the funeral director interrupted him and asked him a question. Hartwig could tell the funeral director was impressed with the message he had brought at the funeral. The funeral director asked several questions, and he answered each one. Hartwig was proud of himself - here was a man who had listened to hundreds of funeral services, and his was singled out as being one of the best. His inner Pharisee stood up for the accolades, and with this on his heart Pastor Hartwig took his place at the head of the casket. He asked the family to listen to the comforting words of Scripture. He intended to read I Corinthians 15:1. Instead, he found the passage he had mistakenly turned to as the funeral director flattered him, I Corinthians 5:1. With much dignity he turned to those at the grave side and read: "It is reported commonly that there are fornicators among you!" Oops.

We like to impress people! We like to look good! People of all ages spend bizarre amounts of time in front of the mirror trying to look good. Like a gymnast after a gold medal performance, when we do something honorable, we dismount for just a moment so everyone can see who it was. We let it slip that we spent the weekend helping rebuild a playground. We sigh more heavily to let it be known that we are tired because we cooked a meal for a shut-in. We are quick to offer an update on so-and-so's mama because we went to the hospital, and we want you to know. Everywhere, people strive to be recognized as important and to look good.

And, of course! Looking good feels good. Pats on the back feel good. Getting attention feels good. Knowing that others admire us or respect us feels good. When you do something nice or faithful, it feels good to get a little recognition for your efforts. Let's face it, God's response to us is not usually a standing ovation for our acts of faith. If a divine "attaboy" is missing, we'll go for the human stamp of approval every time.

That stamp is so seductive and it is so addictive and it is so haunting.

So, who you gonna call? What's the Pharisee buster? Well, Jesus says, "The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted." What busts the inner Pharisee is moving beyond our own needs to the needs of others. What busts the inner Pharisee is building up somebody else. What busts the inner Pharisee is keeping God at the center of it all. It's not that the Pharisees were not important. They were. It's not that they did not do faithful things. They did – prayed, fasted, gave alms. But, what made them hypocrites is that they did that stuff because of how it made them look. If they looked good, they felt good and proud and worthy. As long as they felt good about themselves, they gave no thought to how they could make others feel.

When I was in college, the college president sometimes ate in the cafeteria with the students. Several students worked part-time there bussing tables and washing dishes to help pay tuition and other expenses. Unfortunately, a tradition had developed in the cafeteria. Anytime a table server would accidentally drop a plate or glass onto the floor, the other students would burst into applause in a mocking gesture of recognition. More than once I saw a table server turn bright red as he or she frantically tried to clear the broken china from the floor. One day, the president was at lunch and there was a HUGE crash a few feet from his table. Sure enough, a server had slipped in the rush to clear a table and had dropped an entire tray of dishes. Immediately the dining hall erupted with applause as the guy started to clean up the mess on the floor. Then something different happened. Without saying a word, our president stood up, walked over to the server who was scraping up the mess on the floor, stooped down to his knees in his suit and began to help collect the broken glass and scraps of food and put them back on the tray. The clapping stopped. And the dining hall fell silent as a morgue. For a few seconds we watched in disbelief and felt, ourselves, ashamed.

If anyone would be great; if anyone would be "somebody"; if anyone would deserve recognition, let them look at the college president cleaning food from the cafeteria floor.

You're a Pharisee buster when you can embrace the lowest of the low and identify with their weakness and vulnerability and not tell another living soul. You're a Pharisee buster when you can see the pain and trouble in another's face and risk asking about it. You're a Pharisee buster when you can stick up for someone who is treated unjustly. You're really somebody when in silence you can sit by a bedside and hold a hand so another will not die alone. You're first when you don't mind being last for the sake of another.

And the church? Well, a church is great only to the extent that it opens its doors to people in all kinds of masks. A church is great only to the extent that it turns on the porch lights and serves the least and lowest and the littlest of its community and world. It's such a simple lesson that Jesus taught. But somehow every time it's acted out, there falls a haunted hush over all who see it.