

Of Priests and Pharisees
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Joshua 3:7-17

⁷The LORD said to Joshua, “This day I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, so that they may know that I will be with you as I was with Moses. ⁸You are the one who shall command the priests who bear the ark of the covenant, ‘When you come to the edge of the waters of the Jordan, you shall stand still in the Jordan.’” ⁹Joshua then said to the Israelites, “Draw near and hear the words of the LORD your God.” ¹⁰Joshua said, “By this you shall know that among you is the living God who without fail will drive out from before you the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites, and Jebusites: ¹¹the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is going to pass before you into the Jordan. ¹²So now select twelve men from the tribes of Israel, one from each tribe. ¹³When the soles of the feet of the priests who bear the ark of the LORD, the Lord of all the earth, rest in the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan flowing from above shall be cut off; they shall stand in a single heap.”

¹⁴When the people set out from their tents to cross over the Jordan, the priests bearing the ark of the covenant were in front of the people. ¹⁵Now the Jordan overflows all its banks throughout the time of harvest. So when those who bore the ark had come to the Jordan, and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the edge of the water, ¹⁶the waters flowing from above stood still, rising up in a single heap far off at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan, while those flowing toward the sea of the Arabah, the Dead Sea, were wholly cut off. Then the people crossed over opposite Jericho. ¹⁷While all Israel were crossing over on dry ground, the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the LORD stood on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan, until the entire nation finished crossing over the Jordan.

Matthew 23:1-12

¹Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, ²“The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; ³therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. ⁴They 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. ⁵They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. ⁶They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, ⁷and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. ⁸But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. ⁹And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. ¹⁰Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. ¹¹The greatest among you will be your servant. ¹²All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

We have heard so many stories of the Israelites and the Pharisees in our lifetimes that their portrayal could come down to a caricature - the disobedient Israelites and the law-focused Pharisees. Both of today’s readings remind us that these people were not so one-dimensional. Matthew recounts Jesus telling that “the scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat.” Moses’ seat was a seat of authority and honor. Theologian Earl F. Palmer describes the Pharisees, leaders of the faith, this way: “The Pharisees were an earnest lay movement that sought to be reformers of Israel in a time of compromise and

cynicism...The Pharisees were people who cared deeply for the implications of the law.”¹ The Israelites, in this glimpse today, actually listen to what God has to say to them through Joshua. We don’t read of them bickering or being defiant; today, they trust in God, what God and in has promised to do, to carry them safely across the Jordan River into the Promised Land.

These readings today involve people who loved God but only got it right some of the time. Sound familiar? Back when my brother and I were kids, we received a gift subscription to the magazine Highlights for Children. In every issue was a comic about Goofus and Gallant. For those of you who haven’t read a Goofus and Gallant comic strip, the premise is basic - Goofus makes selfish or thoughtless decisions and Gallant makes what we would call the right decisions, thinking about others over himself, being generous with his time, noble and helpful choices. While I want us to refrain from looking at the Israelites and the Pharisees in such a simplistic way, today’s readings do highlight two sides of the same coin. The Israelites trust in God, allowing God to guide them, rather than insisting on their own plans. The Pharisees, on the other hand, have taken matters into their own hands, relying on only themselves to set the rules and mete out the punishments, based on how they had once understood the word of God through scripture.

I say these depictions are two sides of the same coin because there is a tension here that people have wrestled with for generations. God wishes us to trust in God’s plans for us, not worrying about what tomorrow will bring. AND God gave us the gift of intellect that we might think and create and question. As I mentioned in the New Member class a couple of weeks ago, one of the hallmarks of which I am most appreciative in the Presbyterian faith is the expectation that we will ask questions. And it *is* an expectation, not a mere tolerance of those who ask. Today, as we lift up Reformation Sunday, we give thanks for those who so valued God’s gift of free thinking that they fought for it, for those who were convinced and convicted that the church must always ask itself if it is heeding God’s call, and institute change when it finds itself out of line. In so doing, we cannot stop giving thanks at the 16th century, for there were people committed to reforming the church when it needed it long before then, people like the Pharisees who honestly believed their interpretations of the law were as true as they could be to what God requested and required. We have the luxury of retrospect to see that they had gotten lost in the less-important details and missed the bigger picture.

Those priests, selected to carry the ark of the covenant, and the Pharisees weren’t drastically different people. The phylacteries, referenced by Jesus, which the Pharisees wore, were boxes with straps attached in order to fasten them to the arm and forehead and they held small bits of scroll, with verses of Torah written upon them. Four readings were to be included in the phylactery: two from

¹ *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 4*, p. 260.

Exodus and two from Deuteronomy.

Exodus 13:1-10: ¹The Lord said to Moses: ²Consecrate to me all the firstborn; whatever is the first to open the womb among the Israelites, of human beings and animals, is mine. ³ Moses said to the people, ‘Remember this day on which you came out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, because the Lord brought you out from there by strength of hand; no leavened bread shall be eaten. ⁴Today, in the month of Abib, you are going out. ⁵When the Lord brings you into the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, which he swore to your ancestors to give you, a land flowing with milk and honey, you shall keep this observance in this month. ⁶For seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a festival to the Lord. ⁷Unleavened bread shall be eaten for seven days; no leavened bread shall be seen in your possession, and no leaven shall be seen among you in all your territory. ⁸You shall tell your child on that day, ‘‘It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.’’ ⁹It shall serve for you as a sign on your hand and as a reminder on your forehead, so that the teaching of the Lord may be on your lips; for with a strong hand the Lord brought you out of Egypt. ¹⁰You shall keep this ordinance at its proper time from year to year.

Exodus 13:11-16: ¹¹ ‘‘When the Lord has brought you into the land of the Canaanites, as he swore to you and your ancestors, and has given it to you, ¹²you shall set apart to the Lord all that first opens the womb. All the firstborn of your livestock that are males shall be the Lord’s. ¹³But every firstborn donkey you shall redeem with a sheep; if you do not redeem it, you must break its neck. Every firstborn male among your children you shall redeem. ¹⁴When in the future your child asks you, ‘‘What does this mean?’’ you shall answer, ‘‘By strength of hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery. ¹⁵When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the Lord killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from human firstborn to the firstborn of animals. Therefore I sacrifice to the Lord every male that first opens the womb, but every firstborn of my sons I redeem.’’ ¹⁶It 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.’

Notice the teaching to pass on to children and the marks on hands, or arms, and foreheads, the same place the phylacteries now rest.

Deuteronomy 6:4-9: ⁴ Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. ⁵You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷Recite 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. ⁸Bind them as a

sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead,⁹ and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Deuteronomy 11:13-21: ¹³ If you will only heed his every commandment that I am commanding you today—loving the Lord your God, and serving him with all your heart and with all your soul—¹⁴ then he will give the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the later rain, and you will gather in your grain, your wine, and your oil; ¹⁵ and he will give grass in your fields for your livestock, and you will eat your fill. ¹⁶ Take care, or you will be seduced into turning away, serving other gods and worshipping them, ¹⁷ for then the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you and he will shut up the heavens, so that there will be no rain and the land will yield no fruit; then you will perish quickly from the good land that the Lord is giving you. ¹⁸ You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and fix them as an emblem on your forehead. ¹⁹ Teach them to your children, talking about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ²⁰ Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates, ²¹ so that your days and the days of your children may be multiplied in the land that the Lord swore to your ancestors to give them, as long as the heavens are above the earth.

The Pharisees and all devout Jews followed the commandments of the Lord, the commandments to bind these words to their arms and foreheads so they would not forget, not for show but because they were trying to be true to God. They loved the Lord their God, both priests and Pharisees, just as you and I do, and just as all the saints who have come between our times. But all those people who love Christ and his church may have different viewpoints and even different approaches to being faithful people, that includes those saints of this church and the church universal, who we especially remember today as we celebrate All Saints' Day. For many of us, we tend to remember those who have gone before us in the best light, or at least we want to; after all, "never speak ill of the dead."

If we are honest, though, we can recall decisions made by those saints who came before us which, in retrospect, were more about the less-important details and less about the big picture. And, no doubt, we can recall the same for ourselves. Sometimes, we are more like the trusting Israelites and sometimes we are more like the self-reliant Pharisees, holding fast to our own understandings and forgetting to check them against God's will or simply misinterpreting God's will. To spare ourselves the mistakes of the Pharisees and those saints, who remain saints for their faith and despite their mistakes, should we simply pick a time when it seemed the church was "working," taking on the qualities of the church at that time?

Of course not. Remember we have been given minds for thinking and creating and questioning. We are not called to be passive in our faith and that means we will make mistakes. Even Martin Luther, another father of the Reformation, said, "Be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ

even more boldly. For he is victorious over sin, death, and the world. As long as we are here we have to sin. This life is not the dwelling place of righteousness but, as Peter says, we look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.”² So ask questions, make mistakes, but always bear in mind this question, “Is the Lord in the middle of it all or am I?” For remember, “all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Let us pray: God, as we waver between trusting in you and trusting ourselves over you, strengthen us that we might give power to you instead of assuming it for ourselves. Help us to keep *you* in the center of our lives. Amen.

² <http://www.trinityfrankfort.org/archives/298>, 29 October 2011.