

# To Be the Light – Right Now.

Sermon for February 9,, 2020  
The 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after the Epiphany  
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*For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.*  
Matthew 5:20

Grace to you and peace from the one who is and the one who was and the one who is to come.

*For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.*

Who were those Pharisees? Who were the teachers of the law? What was their righteousness? Why did Jesus object to it?

The Pharisees are my heroes. Their vision and their achievements never cease to amaze me; and it grieves me, it grieves me very much, that many Christians, many theologians and pastors, never bother to educate themselves about the Pharisees. Instead, they happily repeat all kinds of caricatures based on a mixture of ignorance, prejudice, and a great deal of anti-Semitism.

So, let me tell you about the Pharisees: The Pharisees brought spiritual and moral guidance at a time when people were lost and felt very hopeless. First century Palestine had been occupied by the Roman Empire. The Romans controlled all aspects of public life: there was limited freedom of religious and cultural expression; any form of resistance was dealt with very brutally. The Romans extracted valuable resources from their occupied territories. They extracted all kinds of goods and cargo, including human cargo in the form of slaves, and everything that was squeezed from the colonies was then shipped off to Rome and to other parts of the empire. People were put under heavy taxation, and when people got behind and could not pay up, entire families became destitute and sometimes even ended up as slaves.

So those were the bad parts. But there were other aspects as well: The Roman Empire was glittering and glamorous, and it promoted a very luxurious lifestyle. The Romans had advanced

technology; they built impressive cities and high quality roads. They built palaces and sports arenas, temples and public baths, harbors and theaters. Even now, 2000 years later, we can see some of the Roman mosaics that have survived and they are stunning. The remnants of their bath houses show impressive underground plumbing and sophisticated heating systems.

The Romans tended to be very fit and athletic and they were extremely good at sports. They threw lavish parties and hosted elegant dinners. The Romans knew how to have fun, how to live the good life, never mind that it was lived at the expense of others.

Imagine an intelligent and curious young person living in 1<sup>st</sup> Century Palestine under Roman occupation. Imagine that person seeing all the glitter and glamour, the luxurious life-style, the advanced technologies, the great sports events... that persons would surely have been dazzled and bewitched, perhaps secretly admiring the Romans and perhaps secretly despising their own culture and religion.

Why not adopt the Roman way of life? It seemed to be such a wonderful and exciting life. And being religious in the Roman Empire was easy. All that was required was to bow down to a statue of the Roman Emperor, put a grain of incense in the bowl, and acknowledge the emperor as the Son of God. That was all. Beyond that, people were free to practice any kind of religious cults they wished. The East provided an endless supply of mystery cults, each with their own special rituals and rites of initiation.

Joining the Romans in their life-style seemed like a very attractive option. And, not surprisingly, many people decided to go for it. Of all the threats that the Roman Empire posed--the violence, the oppression, the economic exploitation--of all these threats, none was as dangerous as their cultural seduction of the people: a seduction away from people's heritage towards the Roman way of life.

And it was against this cultural and religious erosion that the Pharisees took action, and in my mind, rightfully so. They went about it very thoughtfully and carefully, they did not simply want to preserve their old religion, enshrine the past, and force people to look backward.

Instead they looked for ways in which the teachings of Moses and the prophets could be helpful and meaningful in the life of their fellow Jews. They looked for vibrant, authentic and engaging ways in which common people could connect with the teachings of Moses and the prophets.

And here is what they came up with - and it was brilliant, really. They decided religion belongs in the home. Religion is not just for the priests in the temple, but something that can and should be practiced in every home and every household.

People were encouraged to observe certain prayer times throughout the day, and to keep the Sabbath faithfully, but also to follow laws about food and clothing, about fasting and ritual purity, and engage in prescribed ways of washing hands.

Everything a person did, from getting up in the morning to going to bed at night, became connected to a prayer or a ritual, or blessing, or an observance. And every vessel in the house, every object became a sacred item.

The Pharisees asked for example: Do you have a fruit tree in your garden? Well, the first time a fruit ripens on your tree each year, you greet that fruit with a special blessing. There are prayers and blessings for every object and every event in your daily life.

Or imagine a young woman going to the village well with her little clay jar. Suddenly she sees a glamorous Roman lady in her finery walking down the street, elegant and carefree. The young woman with her simple clay jar might feel envious, her life might seem boring and simplistic. Not so, said the Pharisees. Your humble clay jar is actually a sacred vessel, because the water you bring to your home is used for the important ritual of washing hands; and when you bring this water from the well, you are like a priestess providing a valuable service to your household.

The Pharisees had some great allies among the scribes. The scribes were the most diligent interpreters of the scriptures. They knew the scriptures forward and backwards. They knew all the teachings of the Torah and the prophets. If you needed to settle a property dispute and you wanted to know where in the scriptures you could look for guidance, the scribes would be the ones to ask.

And when the Pharisees promoted the religion of Moses as something that can be practiced in every home and every household, the scribes happily supported them in their quest.

The Pharisees also had opponents: Their opponents were the Sadducees. The Sadducees pursued the opposite goal: They said: Religion does not belong in the home, it belongs in the temple. We should not burden the common people with religious matters. The people should simply pay their temple tax and bring their offerings to the temple, and let the priests worry about the rest. Would it surprise you to learn that the Sadducees were a small elite interested in preserving the power of the priests and the Temple?

But in the end, it was the Pharisees who prevailed. In the year 70 a catastrophe struck: The Jews staged a rebellion against the Roman occupation, which the Romans quickly crushed. And then, in retaliation, the Romans destroyed the city of Jerusalem and the temple. The temple had always been the heartbeat of the Jewish faith. Without the temple, without this beating heart, how could the Jewish faith survive? Impossible!

But look! Suddenly there were a thousand heartbeats! Ten thousand heartbeats! Hundreds of thousands of heartbeats! Thanks to the Pharisees every Jewish home had become a temple. Thanks to the Pharisees, every household could function in a religious way, even without the temple.

And when people had to flee for their lives and became refugees, they were able to bring their daily rituals with them. Before long there were thriving Jewish communities in Corinth, in Antioch, in Rome, and even as far away as Persia.

Out of this crisis of the destruction of the Temple emerged Rabbinic Judaism which is the Judaism as it is practiced today. And the ones who made all of this possible, the ones who laid the cornerstone for Rabbinic Judaism were the Pharisees with their brilliant leadership.

Now, how did Jesus relate to the Pharisees? We know from the Gospel that Jesus often argued with the Pharisees, but arguing was not a bad thing, it was a way of advancing religious insight. The Pharisees always argued, they often argued among themselves.

Jesus had friends who were Pharisees, and some of his own teachings coincided with the teachings of the Pharisees. But in the end, Jesus rejected the path of the Pharisees and he rejected it for two main reasons:

First: The path of the Pharisees left many people out: people with certain professions, such as tax collectors, could not participate, because their profession left them ritually unclean. People with certain medical conditions could not participate, for example people suffering from leprosy or women suffering from excessive bleeding, all of which rendered them ritually unclean.

Secondly: The path of the Pharisees focused too much on human activity and not enough on God's gracious presence. People sometimes became overly proud of their religious achievements, and this pride undermined their relationship with God.

Here is an example that Jesus gave of why the path of the Pharisees was problematic:

*“Two people went up into the temple to pray,  
he said,  
one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.  
The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself:  
‘God, I thank You that I am not like other people:  
swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.  
I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.’  
But the tax collector, standing some distance away,  
was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven,  
but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner!’  
I tell you, (Jesus said) this man went to his house justified  
rather than the other;*

Luke 18:10-14

So then what was the vision of Jesus? What was the different path which Jesus proposed?

For Jesus being was more important than doing. Yes, religious practice was important, but it should come freely from the heart, not from a place of effort or obligation. When people are deeply grounded in the love of God, then they will naturally act with justice, with kindness and with mercy. There is no need to impose a multitude of rules and regulations.

Jesus focused on being rather than on doing. You are the light of the world, he said: You are the salt of the earth. You are, you are, you are, because God created you to be this way. Simply stay grounded in this love, and the rest will come by itself.

Now, how does all of this help us today, in our own life? We too live with a great deal of uncertainty, and many people long for a moral and spiritual compass.

And there are those who are only too willing to tell us how to live, how to think how to feel and what to do in order to be considered good citizens. There are people who tell us how to be aware and conscious, conscious of our various privileges, such as having the privilege of being of a certain race or cultural background or physical ability or immigration status.

We are encouraged to provide our pronouns whenever we introduce ourselves, and to inquire of others what pronouns they prefer or require.

We are encouraged to care about the environment, to use less plastic, to trade in our plastic tooth-brushes for bamboo tooth-brushes, to use public transportation or electric vehicles.

We are encouraged to care about immigration justice and about criminal justice, to stand up against white supremacy, against male dominance, and against sexual harassment.

The list of all the things that we should do and think and feel is very long.

And there are many ways we can fail in all these endless requirements.

Jesus invites us unto a different path, a path where being is more important than doing.

Jesus said: "You are the light." He didn't say: "You must make yourself into a shining light."

We are not on our way toward brightness. We are, right now, light — not only for our own little lives, but light for others, on a lamp stand, illuminating the entire house. Together our lights are like a city shining on a hill by which every tired wanderer can find her way home.

When we accept and live daily the truth of who we are, namely God's beloved children, then very naturally good works will flow from our hearts, good works that are healing for ourselves and for our communities.

But what if nothing flows from our heart? If nothing flows from our heart, then the solution is not to put in more effort. The solution is to ground ourselves more deeply in the love of God until there is so much love that our hearts begin to overflow.

The invitation is to stop worrying about getting it right--to stop working so hard at fulfilling a long list of obligations--and instead to allow ourselves to simply be: Our life is hid in Christ, and the more we make our home there, the more we will simply become what we were created to be: we breathe in mercy and breathe out justice; we breathe in love and breathe out peace. We are light, we are salt, we are healing, we are wholeness. We are. We are. We are. And that is enough.

Amen.