

Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, 10/30/05
St. Augustine's Church, Croton-on-Hudson, New York
Text: Matthew 23:1-12

When I was about eight years old, our Sunday school class decided to collect money for some particular cause. I have no idea now what it was. It wasn't a big fund-raising effort that involved asking other people for contributions – we were just supposed to bring in our individual offering from our allowance or savings.

Everyone brought in a coin or two. For some reason, I brought in a dollar bill. That seems excessive, as I think back on it, but maybe I felt strongly about what we were giving to. I don't remember. But here's the part that I'll never forget. When the jar was passed around the classroom, and it was my turn to put in my contribution, I made a huge deal about not being able to fit my folded dollar bill into the slot cut out for coins on the lid of the jar. I folded and refolded that dollar bill, and all other activity and conversation came to a stop as the rest of the class watched me try to jam that dollar into the jar.

What a declaration I made about myself that day with my actions. I was the most generous of all of the Sunday school students. My contribution was the largest. I was a good person – perhaps a cut above the others in my Sunday school class. To this day, it's a painful memory for me. What in the world made me need to act like that?

Jesus' words are sharply critical of similar actions of the scribes and the Pharisees in today's text from the Gospel of Matthew. It seems that while much of what they were doing was good, in and of itself, that good was apparently offset, from Jesus' point of view, with their need to have others see and applaud it.

These religious leaders have explicitly carried out the commands of Scripture. Deuteronomy 11:18 says, "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." So faithful Jews would put pieces of parchment containing portions of Scripture in little leather boxes, called phylacteries, and wear them so that could see them constantly; so that they could be continually reminded to keep the word of God within them.

The scribes and the Pharisees have carefully followed the instructions given in Numbers 15:38, which states: "Tell the Israelites to make fringes on the corners of their garments throughout their generations and to put a blue cord on the fringe at each corner. You have the fringe so that, when you see it, you will remember all the commandments of the Lord and do them ..."

These religious authorities did what they were supposed to do, but that apparently wasn't enough for them. They needed to have their strict observance of the law of God noticed and praised by others.

Isn't that just human nature? Of course, we want the good that we do to be seen and appreciated by the people around us. It's wonderful to be acknowledged and praised. That's not the only reason we do the good things that we do, but it surely makes some of the hardest things, as well as the more mundane tasks, less burdensome and more pleasurable when someone else sees and cares that we've done them.

I don't think that's what Jesus was concerned about. My guess is that what I wanted, as a child in that Sunday school class, and what some of the religious leaders in Matthew's day wanted, was to be able to establish a hierarchy of goodness. In my eyes, the kids who gave the smallest amount of money were sort of good, but my degree of goodness was significantly more. I could feel better about myself because of where I placed myself on this scale of goodness. Those religious leaders who wore the biggest phylacteries and the broadest fringes could feel better about themselves because of where they placed themselves on the ladder of righteousness and obedience to the law.

Why do we feel the need to position ourselves in relationship to others in terms of our righteousness? I think that, deep inside, we're painfully aware of falling far short of loving God and loving our neighbor. I remember hearing someone say that if what ran through our minds during the day were broadcast to the world, we'd never show our face again. That's certainly true for me. I won't even put an Episcopal Church emblem on my car, because I'd be too embarrassed to associate myself with the church when I yell at the driver in front of me for going too slowly, or when I mentally label someone an idiot for making some minor mistake that I, myself, have made myself countless times. When we're honest about it, the acknowledgement of our own sinfulness can be pretty hard to bear. The gap between the best that God intends for us and the reality of who we are is, frankly, enormous. So, when there is something that I've done right, I want to cling to it and lift it up for all to see, so that I'll be acknowledged and recognized. That helps me forget, for a little while at least, that of which I'm ashamed.

There's a better way to deal with that gap that we experience between what God desires for and from us, and that which is our day to day reality. We can simply accept the forgiveness of God for all the ways that we fall short of God's best for us. We can gratefully and intentionally acknowledge God's deep and abiding love for each one of us, as we are, flaws and all, and rejoice in that unconditional love. And we can anticipate the coming day as the gift that it is: another chance, a clean slate - full of hope and possibilities for loving God and loving others, empowered by the spirit of the One who forgives and loves us, no matter what, and who, himself, embodied the humble, selfless love for which we've been created.

The bottom line is this: because of Christ, the gap between who we know ourselves to be and the very best that God desires for us has been bridged forever. Christ has filled that gap, for love of each one of us. Because of Christ, we need never jockey for position in the hierarchy of righteousness. The playing field has been rendered completely and utterly level - no matter how good we or anyone else make things look on the outside; and no matter how much we or anyone else despair over what we hide. In and through

Christ, all comparisons have become completely irrelevant. There's more than enough of God's love to go around.

May we embrace this good news, receive the love and forgiveness of God, and simply and gratefully respond – in love for God manifested in compassion for others. Amen.