

STANDING OUT BY STEPPING DOWN  
Joshua 3: 7-17; Matthew 23:1-12  
Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost • November 5, 2023  
by Pat Berger

The sub-heading for our verses from the Gospel of Matthew in my study Bible is, “Jesus Denounces Scribes and Pharisees.” And he does. But look where he starts: “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; . . .’ We become accustomed to hearing the scribes and the Pharisees condemned severely; here, Jesus compliments them. That might even slip right by us, and yet Jesus said, “ . . . do whatever they teach you and follow it; . . .” These two groups knew their Scriptures well, and interpreted them well – and then. And then there is the remainder of that verse: “. . . but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach.” Oops. We have heard that one before, maybe closer to home than we would like.

Most scholars think that the one who wrote the Gospel of Matthew changed here to “scribes and Pharisees” from “chief priests and elders” because he was writing to the church in his time, which would have been 50 or so years after the crucifixion and resurrection. The chief priests and elders had lost position and authority by then. The writer of this Gospel had three main complaints about the scribes and Pharisees: they really liked public recognition, they didn’t practice what they taught, and for them, the law was more important than the people it was supposed to serve.

The law was to be for the people, according to one ancient teacher, the same kind of burden that sails are to a ship. The sails were heavy and they took up space – and without them, the boat wasn’t going to go very far. That was the intention of the law: it wasn’t meant to be

easy for the Chosen Ones to live by the law, but the law would make their lives easier. Under the scribes and Pharisees, not only was the law not easy; it wasn't always even possible to obey. And the scribes and Pharisees themselves seemed at times to be exempt from the law, or at least to have more wiggle room than did everyone else. Not fair, not good – and not what God had in mind for the beloved children.

Also, in the honor/shame culture in which they lived, if one weren't honored in public, one had no status at all. It would be important to have the best seat in the synagogue or at a banquet; it would be important to be recognized – loudly – in the marketplace; it would be important to have the showiest trim on one's prayer shawl and the broadest strap on one's prayer box. These items were to have reminded them of who they were and whose, and instead people were using them to gain personal attention. The servant leadership that Jesus preached and lived was so far from what these people did. "The greatest among you will be your servant," Jesus said, and that is how he lived his life. Believing, being faithful, was not about the believer or the faithful one; what is was about was God.

Had the faithful ones reminded themselves regularly of readings like ours from Joshua this morning, likely Jesus' task would have been easier. Joshua was now the one who was leading, for God, the Hebrew people as they came ever closer to the Promised Land. In the verses just previous to what Gina read for us, Joshua gave final instructions before crossing the River Jordan. He told the priests what they would need to do with the Ark of the Covenant, and then he told the people: "Sanctify yourselves; for tomorrow the Lord will do wonders among you." Imagine being at that place, after the years of slavery for your parents and grandparents, and then after spending maybe your whole life journeying through wilderness: finally, finally, God was going to do wonders. Not that God hadn't done wonders all along, thanks be to God, but now, thanks be to God, they were about to be participants in The Wonders; they would enter the

Promised Land. And all the while that God, through Joshua, was giving instructions to them, we do not hear anyone say, well, I should enter first. No one said, I have the nicest prayer shawl – let me go ahead. No one said, I must sit at the head table – see you all later. The priests led them because they were carrying the Ark of the Covenant – the people thought God lived in that ark; God would lead them into the Promised Land. The priests stood in the middle of the Jordan so that the people could cross on dry land; they stood there until the whole people had, at last, crossed into their new homeland. And in verses that follow what we read today, Joshua recapped their journey for them and it is clear that Joshua knew himself to be God's servant in all of it; God had done all that had been done.

People being people, however, they didn't remember all of that forever. And by the time we are to where the Gospel of Matthew was being written, it was all about fancy clothes and one's place at the table. "The greatest among you will be your servant," Jesus said, and Jesus was. We, too, were created to serve. If you have had a chance to read your morning news already today, think about those about whom you read: which of them seem to remember that they have been created to serve, and which might have forgotten that part. We were given God's good creation that we might serve it. When we can use our position – whether in the family or the community or even a larger arena – when we use that to serve, we make progress for God's Kingdom. Carter Heyward wrote about this way of life this way: it is "living courageously in a spirit of radical connectedness with others, which enables us to see ourselves as God sees us: sisters and brothers, each as deeply valued and worthy of respect as every other." Our circumstances are much better than those of most in most other places in God's Kingdom. As you look at those around you this week, really look at them, remember "radical connectedness;" we are all connected, and we are each one equally valued. All that is asked of each one is that we be the ones God created us to be. That is all that it takes.