

The Twentieth Second Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 26A, November 5, 2017
Matthew 23:1-12
***“Do as they say, not as they do,
And do as I say not as I do”***

Matthew 23:1-12

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

Mahatma Gandhi of India ...ok, I know it sounds a bit weird to begin a sermon with the words, “Mahatma Gandhi”...but

He is **alleged** to have said, "If I had ever met someone who was a genuine Christian, I would have become one immediately."

That is a stinging judgment of we Christians. At the same time, it challenges every Christian to examine the genuineness of his or her walk and witness to others.

But Gandhi's statement bears truth – most of us talk a better game than we produce. We are some sort of Christian pretenders – pretending to be more devout and pious than we really are in life.

I wonder how many other people share Gandhi's thought about us Christians?

We need to ask ourselves: "How authentic, how credible is my demonstration of the Christian life?"

Jesus is preaching against the Pharisees – that sect of Judaism that carried so much weight in the religious atmosphere of Jerusalem in the first century.

Now first here is a bit about Judaism in 1st century Jerusalem. The Pharisees and the Saducees and the Essenes and the Zealots were not ALL of Judaism. They were parties or groups within the whole of Judaism without being the whole of Judaism.

Think of the Episcopal Church being the larger part of Christianity. Now think of the Baptist, the Catholics, the Calvinists, and perhaps the Methodist as being smaller groups of Christianity, and you may have a better picture of the Judaism in Jerusalem during this time.

Jesus accuses those Pharisees of pretending, dressing in the costume of the religious without living into the life their religion demanded. [***do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach.***]

Jesus is hard on the Pharisees, so hard, in fact that we have adopted a word in our vernacular – pharisaic – when someone acts one way but in private lives another.

Jesus was preaching against people who took those qualities that should have brought out the best in them, and yet instead they warped those gifts into a misshapen, misinformed message.

To the world the Pharisees embodied piety and purity. They took the Torah seriously, so seriously that they committed their lives to itemizing and analyzing every possible interaction there might be between daily life and the laws of Moses.

They labored to inject spiritual meaning into all everyday actions.

The Pharisees insisted that the Sabbath be as separated as possible from the rest of the “work week.” They carefully calculated and itemized tithes for all sorts of holy and helpful reasons.

Yet Jesus singled out their fastidious faithfulness as an example of taking the best intentions, the best qualities of piety and purity, and lashing them to nitpicking legalism, that their Pharisaic pride overwhelmed their piety.

But perhaps the worst quality the Pharisees embodied was also the most human — they wanted to be seen and known and recognized for all their efforts.

Don't you recognize these people?

Don't you see some of them in us?

I certainly see some of them in me.

Here is a list of Jesus' criticisms about religious leadership in his day:

They did not practice what they taught (hypocrisy).

They put heavy burdens on others but not themselves (legalism).

They sought and loved public recognition (pride).

Status, respect and titles were important to them (arrogance).

They locked people out of the kingdom (judgmental).

They established laws to benefit themselves (greed).

They neglected to emphasize justice and mercy (bias).

They were accomplices to silencing the prophets (oppressive).

[George Johnson, *Critical Decisions in Following Jesus*, CSS Publishing Company.]

These are all very human traits in no way restricted only to Pharisees.

I know many of you have watched the British comedy "Keeping Up Appearances"? It's on PBS and BBC America, if you have cable.

The program is about a family by the name of Bucket, but Mrs. Bucket wants desperately to be someone of importance and puts on all kinds of airs. She insists that her name be pronounced *bouquet* not Bucket.

As you can guess, every week she is put in her place.

And that's what Jesus did with the Pharisees.

But the message for us in this reading is similar to the one for the Pharisees – if we are going to talk the talk, then we must walk the walk!

Gandhi's statement makes more sense now.

"If I had ever met someone who was a genuine Christian, I would have become one immediately."

That is a stinging judgment of Christians and us too.

But at the same time, it challenges every one of us to examine the genuineness of our walk and witness.

Do we really do as we say we do?

Have we gotten beyond the pretending stage of our Christian life?

Are we working in our lives to change for the nearer life of Christian faith?

Perhaps Jesus would say the same about us:

“Do as they say, but not as they do!”