

## “Crossing Again”

Sermon Preached by Rev. Young-Mee Park

At First United Methodist Church of Oak Park

October 30, 2011/ Reformation Sunday

Texts: Matthew 23:1-12, Joshua 3:7-17, 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13

Jesus' presence could not pass unnoticed. Immediately after his messianic entry into Jerusalem (21:1-11), Jesus goes straight to the Temple and throws out all those who have set up shop, buying and selling. He overturns the tables of money changers and the stalls of dove merchants (21:12-17). It is no wonder, those of the religious establishment are not very happy. In the past two Sundays, we read about the Pharisees coming to Jesus with tricky questions. I don't know whether you still remember them or not, but two weeks ago, it was about the legitimacy of paying taxes to Caesar (22:15-22). And last week, it was about the greatest commandment of the law (22:34-40). It was not part of our reading this season, but, between the two, there was also a question about the Resurrection (22:23-33). The Pharisees are desperate to entrap and discredit Jesus. Yet, each time, Jesus confounds them, with superior knowledge and irrefutable logic, of course, but most importantly, with the wisdom, power, and authority that belong only to him, Christ, the Messiah.

As the story gets to our lesson today, it seems that Jesus' running conflict with the Pharisees comes to a head. Addressing his disciples, along with the crowd that had gathered with them, Jesus says:

*"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 do all their deeds to be seen by others... 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."* (23:2-3, 5a, 6-7)

This is harsh, isn't it? Few passages in the New Testament feature such excoriating polemic. At issue is hypocrisy, vanity, self-promotion, attention-seeking piety.

Some of you who are well versed in the Bible may simply nod your heads, thinking that is who the Pharisees were - hypocrites who deserved all these harsh words. Others may think that rather than a condemnation of a particular people or a particular religion, this is a warning about the dangers of leadership in general, a warning to those hypocrites out there in politics, in society, and also, in our churches.

I am one of those who dare to teach and preach, and I acknowledge, I am liable to this sin of pride and prestige Jesus condemns in our lesson today. Deep inside me, I know that I have this instinctual desire that people should look at me and recognize how good and hard-working I am. If I am being brutally honest, I have to acknowledge that I want to draw everyone's eyes toward myself. I want people to look at me. I want people to look at my church and recognize how much better we are when compared to some of our neighbor churches. I know that would give me a subtle, and yet sure, satisfaction. Yes, I am a hypocrite. I am a sinner. I acknowledge my drive toward achievement and recognition. I confess my compulsion of pride.

And yet, I wonder whether this compulsion, or this sinful drive, is something specific to me and others who are foolish enough to preach and lead, or something rather universal, something that is part of our human condition. Well, you tell me. Is this your experience, too? Have you ever thought that in today's lesson, Jesus may be speaking about you also, and not only about the Pharisees, or rabbis, or ministers, or politicians, or whomever?

In his letter to the Romans, chapter 7, Paul cries out: "*Wretched man that I am! I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind.*" (Romans 7: 24, 15, 22-23) What I read in this passage is another human being in honest struggle between good and evil, between the law of God and the law of sin. Yes, Paul, too, knew that inner conflict. "*The moment I decide to do good,*" he says, "*sin is there to trip me up,*" "*I truly delight in God's commands,*" he says, "*but, it's pretty obvious that not all of me joins in that delight. Parts of me covertly rebel, and just when I least expect it, they take charge.*" (The Message, Romans 7:21-23)

It's obvious that Paul, too, knew that his desires or motives were not always pure. They rarely are. God's commands are blameless and pure, but we are not. We are full of ourselves. Wretched men and women that we are!

What, then, should we do? How do we deal with our sinful nature, particularly with our compulsions of pride and prestige? How do we regulate our feelings and instincts rather than let them drive us automatically?

The answer, my friends, is grace. The answer, my friends, is Jesus. Yes, the one who condemns these sins is also the one who gives us the power and freedom to defeat them. Jesus set us free. Jesus set the things right in this life of contradictions, where we want to serve God with all our hearts and minds, but are pulled by the influence of sin to do something totally different. In Christ Jesus, God loves us and forgives us. We do not have to prove ourselves. We do not need human masters to confer worth upon us. God knows who we are and what we do, inside out. We can put our whole mask-making industry out of business. All we need to do is to receive the Word of God for what it really is and let it work within and among us, like the Thessalonians in our Epistle lesson.

In our Old Testament lesson, we find the people of Israel standing once again before a body of water. 40 long years of wandering is about to end. They now see the Promise Land lying before their eyes. But Israelites must pass through the water to enter it, just like they did in the beginning of their journey. There are no alternative options. No bridges. No detour. What stops the water this time? The Ark of the Covenant, the symbol of God's abiding and sustaining presence. As long as the Ark is in the middle of the river, waters stand in a single heap, and Israelites can cross over safely.

141 years of life together as a church, we are crossing again, my friends, with the Word of God as our rock, our center, and our ground. We are crossing again, my friends, with the presence of Christ in our midst to hold back the waters of chaos in a single heap. We are crossing again, not to build a name for ourselves, not for our own promotion and edification, but in humility and gratitude, with the Spirit of Life in our midst, to serve God and God's Word. Thanks be to God! We are crossing again, my friends! Thanks be to God! Amen!