

**“Buckle Up”**  
**Year A—31<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**Matthew 23: 1-12**  
**Nov. 5, 2017 ( All Saints)**  
**Rev. Rob Carter**

“Buckle Up”

If we hadn't stopped reading where we did... If we just kept going on reading through the end of Matthew's 23<sup>rd</sup> chapter, it'd quickly become clear that Jesus just can't stand it anymore. He's lost all patience with the religious elites of Israel. In fact, this entire chapter is really just Jesus laying into the Pharisees and scribes. He holds nothing back.

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You tithe mint, dill, and cumin, but have neglected the weightier matter of the law, like justice and mercy and faith. It's these you ought to have practiced. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.”

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You may be clean on the outside, but inside you're full of greed and self-indulgence.”

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You're like whitewashed tombs, beautiful to look at, but dead and filthy on the inside.”

In total, Jesus not only calls the scribes and Pharisees hypocrites seven times, he also calls them snakes, a bunch of fools, and my personal favorite, a brood of vipers.

I gotta admit... as one who isn't known for having a wealth of patience, it's kind of nice to see Jesus lose his.

And yet, as tough as this language is, every time I read this passage I'm reminded of something Frederick Buechner once wrote, noting that when Jesus called the Pharisees a brood of vipers... he did so, because he loved them.<sup>1</sup> Jesus knew the faithfulness they were capable of, and longed for them to live into the fullness of their faith, rather than saying one thing and doing another. So he called them out, hoping to lead them into fuller, more faithful life.

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The Pharisees hadn't always been so hypocritical, though. Scholars posit that the Pharisaic movement actually began “as an earnest lay movement” aimed at reforming Israel at a time when they were falling away from the traditional values and understandings of faith.<sup>2</sup> So it seems, rather ironically, that the Pharisees came to life in order to combat what they viewed as hypocrisy within their faith. They were the ones who rose to power arguing against the religious elites' version of faithfulness, trying to keep Israel on the straight and narrow, so to speak.

This is why the Pharisees placed such importance upon the Hebrew law. To them, it was critical that faithful Hebrews obey these laws—all of them—at every turn.

But over time, the Pharisees lost sight of this priority. They became more interested in doing things the right way rather than simply doing the right things. And even when they did the right things, Jesus says they did them for the wrong reasons.

<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner, published in *Wishful Thinking and Beyond Words*; also noted on <http://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2016/6/29/love>

<sup>2</sup> Earl F. Palmer in Pastoral Perspective article on Matthew 23: 1-12 in *Feasting on the Word Year A Volume 4*, edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 260.

Listen to what Jesus says to the crowds.

“The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; so do what they *teach*, but *don’t* do as they do. For they don’t practice what they teach. Rather, they tell you what to do... but don’t help you do it. And even though they do all these great things... they do them because they want your esteem and your respect more than they really want to glorify God.”

We’ve seen this story before, right? When people seek places of power planning to change things for the better, only to lose sight of their priorities once they obtain the power. Once the Pharisees obtained a place of power and privilege themselves, their concern shifted from living out their faith, to making sure they kept their power and privilege.

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Comfort and privilege can do that, of course. They can cause us to ignore the Spirit’s call to what our faith requires. When things are going well for us, when our bellies are full and we’re *not* the ones being oppressed, when we’re *not* the ones in harm’s way, it’s just plain harder to hear the Spirit calling us to live more simply so that others may simply live. To take risks of faith in order to pursue peace for others. To walk the walk of sacrificial love not because we have to, but because Jesus asks us to.

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William Sloane Coffin was a Presbyterian pastor I’ve long admired. His most famous pastorate was that of the Riverside Church in New York City, where he not only spoke about but worked tirelessly for social justice causes. He was a constant critic not just of society and politics, but of the church, as well. He once said, “We (Christians) are called on not to mirror but to challenge culture, not to sustain but to upend the status quo, and if that to some sounds overly bold, isn’t it true that God is always beckoning us toward horizons we aren’t sure we want to reach?”<sup>3</sup> I believe he’s right. “We (Christians) are called on not to mirror but to challenge culture, not to sustain but to upend the status quo, and if that to some sounds overly bold, isn’t it true that God is always beckoning us toward horizons we aren’t sure we want to reach?”

For as people of faith, I’m not so sure prestige and comfort should even be on our priority list, let alone near the top of it. I mean, should it be comfortable to follow a Messiah who told would-be followers to go and sell everything they have, give the money to the poor, and then come follow him? Should privilege be anything close to important when Jesus made clear that his followers must put the last first... and lift up the humbled... and esteem the least rather than the greatest.

Perhaps this is why author Annie Dillard once wrote, “If we Christians truly believe half the things we profess to believe, then church pews would come equipped with seatbelts.”<sup>4</sup> Can you picture it? By next Sunday we’ll have seatbelts installed across the pews, and there’ll be new instructions for each and every worshipper. Everyone must buckle up as worship begins because the Gospel is gonna turn your world upside down.

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<sup>3</sup> William Sloane Coffin, *Credo* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 146.

<sup>4</sup> Annie Dillard, paraphrased, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*.

It's gonna reshape your values... and reorder your priorities.

It's gonna fill your heart to the point you can't help but give yourself away so that others might uncover God's love for them.

And it's gonna empower you until you realize that ministry isn't for just for some... ministry is for you!

So buckle up, Towson Presbyterian! Our faith in Christ is gonna lead us on one wild, sacrificial, life-changing, world-transforming journey where comfort and privilege are things of the past.

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Of course... we're not *really* going to install seatbelts, right? But what if our goal was to be that kind of church? What if we took seriously Jesus' call to live as the kind of disciples who understand that his grace and love are not only deeply personal gifts to us from God... but also transformational gifts that should change the way we see the world, and the people within it, and the very point behind our living.

I mean, what if we were to be the kind of church and disciples, who see here at the Lord's Table not simply gifts of bread and wine that convey love and grace for all who consume them... but who understand we who are blessed by Christ, are also nourished and equipped by Christ to go out and *be* his body in the world. That we, who share in this meal, are then called to go out and minister in Jesus name, as Jesus showed us to... Tending to the sick. Embracing the outcast. Speaking truth to power. Caring for Creation. Striving for justice at every turn as we seek to reveal grace and love in the midst of each and all of our encounters.

As the Apostle Paul makes clear in our first lesson this morning, faith in Christ requires hard work. Constant, ongoing, hard but ever-so-meaningful work, as faith calls us away from comfort and privilege in pursuit of fullness and joy for each and for all.

It's so much more than a Sunday morning tradition or the occasional dalliance into outreach. This faith which we claim is a calling. It's an orientation. It's a blessing that is to shape every facet of our living.

As I shared two weeks ago, so I share again. It's what Christian stewardship is all about. And praise be to God, it's the strongest force for good our world has. When the people of God come together to be the body of Christ in the world, incarnating the sacrificial love Jesus continues to makes possible. Generous, self-giving, compassion-filled love.

So let us, friends, prepare to come to the table. Let us prepare to be nourished by Christ himself. For here, Jesus makes clear, saints and sinners are welcome. Hypocrites, too. It is here where we touch and taste signs of the gifts of God for the people of God... that we might be nourished and equipped to truly live the faith we profess, and so be what this world so desperately needs—the body of Christ—love incarnate in the world today.

Let us come... let us taste... and let us buckle up for the joyful journey of faith before us. Amen.