



November 2, 2008

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Verboom

Matthew 23:1-12

“Pomp and Prizes and Precious People”

People love **pomp** and glitter. It impresses us. It captures our attention and suggests peoples’ lives and accomplishments are important. We love graduations from pre-school and from graduate schools; we love royal weddings and the Academy Awards.

We are also fond of **prizes**, awards, recognition. These are handed out to Nobel Scientists and first grade spelling bee winners. This begins in elementary school. At “awards assemblies” awards are given for excellence in various subjects, for the Science Fair and Young Authors’ contest.

Adults like winning awards at work, or from volunteer organizations. They like winning money at poker, or a prize at a bridge game. We ALL love prizes and awards. We bask in the glow of recognition for accomplishments.

Pomp and prizes aren’t evil. They help us celebrate the importance of pivotal events in our lives. But there can be a problem with pomp and prizes. They can make some people feel great and important, and leave others feeling small and worthless.

Jesus knew this happens. It happens a lot, and it happens easily. In our Bible reading for today Jesus warns us about arrogance and self-exaltation in the faith community.

Jesus pointed to the scribes and Pharisees as negative examples. He pointed to their weaknesses. In the Jewish religious writings called the Talmud, seven different

kinds of Pharisees were described. As we review them, we will recognize them from our own experience, both in the secular and religious worlds.

First, there was the “Shoulder Pharisee”. He was meticulous in his observance of God’s Law, but he wore his good deeds on his shoulder. He sought a reputation for purity and goodness. He obeyed the law, but not to please God so much as to look better than others.

Second, there was the “Wait a little” Pharisee. He was the Pharisee who could always produce an entirely valid excuse for putting off a good deed. He said he accepted the strictest rules of his faith, but he always found a reason for his practice to be a little bit off.

Third, there were the “Bruised” or “Bleeding Pharisees”. They got their name for this reason: women were not to be spoken to in public. These Pharisees did not allow themselves to even look at a woman on the street. So, they walked around with their eyes shut, bumping into walls, buildings and obstructions. Their bruises and scrapes were worn as badges of holiness.

The next category was the “Hump-backed Pharisee” or the “Tumbling Pharisee”. These guys walked in such ostentatious humility that they were bent over. They wouldn’t lift their feet from the ground, shuffling along as a symbol of their humility. This led them to trip and fall a lot.

Then there was the “Compounding Pharisee”. This fellow added up his good deeds and computed them like compound interest. He had a balance sheet to measure his relationship to God.

The “Timid Pharisee” was always in dread of divine judgment. He was compulsively driven to whitewash his exterior, attempting to appear good at all costs. All of life was a terror-stricken preparation for judgment.

Finally, there was the “God-fearing Pharisee”. This was the Pharisee who really and truly loved God, and found delight in obedience to him, no matter how difficult that might be.

That is the rabbis’ own classification of the Pharisees. Jesus’ words must have rung true to many. Jesus described what we all do and are tempted to do, in order to feel important and valued.

Jesus came into this world with a purpose. He came to tell us, “You ARE important and valued.” He died for us, and you don’t do that for people you think

are worthless. But we have a problem with this. We have trouble believing in our own importance unless someone else is less important. However, **in God's eyes ALL are precious, beyond the capacity of words to express.** Our lives and actions must reflect this truth.

Today we remember the SAINTS who have gone before us into glory. Are there people, **precious people** who have been instruments of God's love in your life? Who has helped you know that you are important and valued? These precious people are much more important than any pomp or prizes. We celebrate them today, and thank God for them. During our time of joys and concerns we will remember the church members who have died this past year, and thank God for their lives.

Every time a child is baptized in this church, we are invited by God to "offer ourselves as instruments of God's love" in that child's life. We thank God for the precious people who have done that for us, and ask God's help as we seek to live in that same way with others. God can steer us right. Amen.