

Sermon—Matthew 23: 1-12
(November 12, 2017-23rd Sunday after Pentecost)

Over the last few months I've engaged in a recurring ritual of frustration that involves going through the jeans in my closet and finding only two pairs that fit. The ones that no longer fit into aren't jeans that I wore ten or twenty years ago but that I wore just last year. It's frustrating because the jeans are a reminder of where I've been and could be in terms of my weight. It's not some ideal I only imagine, it's a real possibility that I have glimpsed. Have you experienced something like that? You go away on a spiritual retreat or even a nice vacation and you're all relaxed and centred and two minutes after you're back into your regular routine it's like it never happened and you yearn for what you had and lost. You're in the depths of grief, with no end in sight and it's made worse by the yearning for what was before the loss. You're stuck between where you are in life and the possibilities that could be, possibilities that you have actually experienced. We've all been there. It can be frustrating, lonely, confusing, and demoralizing.

Spiritual writer Parker Palmer has come up with a name for that place where we stand between the reality of what is and the possibilities we have glimpsed. He calls it the tragic gap.¹ As Christians we all stand in that tragic gap, we all live in the gap between the way things are and the possibilities we have glimpsed when we allowed God to have more of a say in our lives and in our world. It's a tough place to live, this tragic gap. Unresolved tension is never a comfortable state. If you value yourself a good problem solver you can start to feel somewhat incompetent and embarrassed by your inability to close that tragic gap. The temptation is always to break the tension of standing in the tragic gap as quickly as possible, to escape it, to evade it. We do this in two ways: through control and denial.

The Pharisees in our scripture today exemplify the control response to the tragic gap of faith. Their response to the tension between the way things are and the way they could be is to turn God into a kind of control freak. They had taken the scriptures and reduced them to a set of rules and regulations about eating, drinking, worshipping, personal hygiene and many other aspects of life. This is not to disparage Judaism. There is a beautiful tradition in Judaism of sanctifying all aspects of life, where the smallest, most mundane acts of daily living become acts of worship. But, the Pharisees had turned this larger, holy sense of faith into a manageable, checklist kind of religion that they used to puff themselves up and to judge others. That's why Jesus says; "They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the

¹ Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward An Undivided Life*, p. 175.

shoulders of others...They do all their deeds to be seen by others..." (vss. 4-5) The Pharisees deal with the tension of the tragic gap of faith by escaping it through self-serving control that allows them to be seen as defenders of the faith.

The other response to the tragic gap of faith is denial. Quite simply we deny that there is any gap at all between the way things are and the way they could be. Jesus is like the elephant in the room that gets ignored. I see this in United States politics quite a bit among evangelical politicians and their supporters. Even though they speak of making a country more in line with the gospel of Jesus Christ, quite often they settle for equating the way things are with the gospel. God is used to justify military exploits, the demonization of science, the discrimination of homosexuals and the inviolability of guns. Jesus, instead of being a challenge to the culture becomes a mascot for the culture. Religion is used to justify policies that arise from the fear of having to stand in the gap between the way things are and the way they could be if the gospel was actually allowed to have free reign. The tension of the tragic gap of faith is escaped through a self-serving denial that allows those involved to parade around as champions of God and country.

To a certain extent control and denial are understandable responses to the tragic gap of faith: standing there is painful. A paralysis sets in, an anxiety because we feel lost, we don't want to stay where we are, but we don't see a way ahead either. I think one of Jesus' messages this week is that it is better to sit in that pain, it is better to feel that anxiety deeply than to proceed with plans and schemes that serve only our egos. It is better to get comfortable with not knowing than to make idols out of our fears and insecurities. It is better to admit that you don't know how to live in that gap than to retreat into control or denial. Here's the thing, control and denial are both abdications of faith. Both use God but neither listens to God. Ultimately we wind up being self-serving, using God to escape our fears, diminishing our lives to the smallness of our insecurities. In the words attributed to Jesus: "All who exalt themselves will be humbled..."

Jesus says that as his followers we are to put ourselves in positions of unknowing and to get comfortable there—don't let yourselves be called rabbi or teacher for you are all students and you have only one Teacher. Not knowing opens the door to God, opens the door to our souls. Getting comfortable with the pain and anxiety of our limited knowledge, setting our egos aside opens the door for the infinite possibilities of God to come rushing into our lives. Again, in the words attributed to Jesus, "All who humble themselves will be exalted." When we get comfortable with not knowing we can set our egos aside and it becomes possible to enter into the role of servant: "The greatest among you will be your servant" (vs. 11),

Jesus says. The one skill a servant needs above all others, the essential skill for standing in the tragic gap is the ability to listen. Listening is the key to faith.

Here lies the hope for the tragic gaps not only in our individual lives, but in the life of our church. These are difficult times in the church. The era of Christendom is long gone. We are becoming increasingly irrelevant in the lives of people and in society at large. We sit in this gap between the church that was and the church that God calls us to be. In this place of anxiety and fear we can be tempted to retreat into old ways and deny the gap or fall into control by looking for ways to ensure our survival as an institution. But if the church is to survive with any kind of integrity it is because God has a use for it. God wants it to be a servant church. Our call as individuals and as a community of faith is to stand in that tragic gap calmly, confidently that God is there calling us, waiting to exalt those who will humble themselves and listen in faith. The tragic gap is a dangerous place; it's the place we could very well lose ourselves if we fall prey to fear and the enticements of the ego. But the tragic gap, that place between reality and possibility is also the place where God calls out, ready to be heard by those with the hearts of servants. May God bless us all with such hearts.

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