

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
“The Mighty Acts of God: Follow the Leader”  
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Exodus 14; Matthew 23:1-12

Most of us here are familiar with the movie “The Ten Commandments” in which Charlton Heston plays Moses. And if you are like me (before the days of streaming, and cable, and DVD’s), you couldn’t wait until it came around on TV each year. The entire story of Moses is a “crowd favorite” ... rich with drama, action and miracles.

In the “Crossing of the Sea”, we cheer when the Israelites escape from the Egyptians, and we group these two peoples into the “good guys and bad guys.” But in so doing, we often miss the point of the real battle. The real battle is between competing sovereignties- Pharaoh and Yahweh. The real issue is not the rescue or liberation of Israel, but the triumph of Yahweh over Pharaoh.

When things get tough and we can’t see the outcome, we often revert back to the familiar, even though it is damaging or leads us away from trusting God. This is what happened to the Israelites in verse 12, when they say: “Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, ‘Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians’? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.”

Although the Israelites were challenging Moses and not Yahweh in this statement, Moses needed to remind them that Yahweh was surely active and pivotal in this crisis. Yahweh is always active and pivotal... we just might not understand how.

The entire story of chapter 14 in the book of Exodus is really a spectacular reversal of the means of power. It stands not only as a witness to the power of Yahweh, ... it is also a call to faith.

Scripture is all about turning the tables of unjust power, and acknowledging that God is, ultimately, in charge. And Jesus calls us... all of us... to live out our faith in such a way.

When Jesus challenges the scribes and the Pharisees in our reading from Matthew, he is not challenging the root of the teachings. Rather, he is challenging their inconsistent practice of such teachings.

It is important to understand the role that the scribes and the Pharisees played. The scribes (although not officially a sect) were a professional class that acted somewhat as lawyers. They were highly educated ... schooled in the Jewish tradition and how to apply it to current day issues.

The Pharisees were mostly educated laypersons whose original intent was to make the “every day” holy... and they sought to do this by applying Jewish law to everything. While their original goal was to increase faithfulness to the law in the living of everyday life, they did this by pulling out 613 laws from the Old Testament and viewing them as personal requirements for all Jews.

Among the Sadducees, the Essenes, the Zealots, and the Pharisees, the Pharisees were the only sect that survived after the destruction of the temple in 70 CE. They were the primary challengers against Matthew’s community by demanding fidelity to the Torah. The Pharisees applied the priestly purity laws to all Jews as markers of identity ... those things necessary to live the life of a good Jew.

But in telling people that they must fulfill the 613 laws in order to live lives pleasing to God, they set an unrealistic burden upon the shoulders of those who sought to follow the faith. An unrealistic burden that they themselves did not fulfill. Moreover, their focus on the 613 rules often neglected the more important issues of love and justice, which were paramount to Jesus' message.

Of course, I am not deriding rules and regulations. We have often spoken here of the importance of rules in our lives to bring order out of chaos, and ensure safety and well-being. But these were 613 rules and regulations one supposedly needed to follow to guarantee living a life pleasing to God.

And Jesus was certainly not against rules and regulations. He reminded his followers more than once of the importance of the law. But the scribes and Pharisees provided such rich fodder for Jesus by repeatedly falling so very short of the ideals they preached. Their human nature prevented them from consistently practicing what they preached. And we have the same human nature.

Do we also provide rich fodder for Jesus' critiques?

As a pastor, I am considered to be a church leader. And as we close in on the beginning of Advent, I find myself drooling over the ministry catalogs ... wondering if I dare treat myself to a new stole for the liturgical season. But do my robe and stole make me a better Christian? Do they make any of my words more meaningful or more authentic? I like wearing a robe on Sunday, as it takes the pressure off what I'm wearing. And I've told you before that I like the stoles. I enjoy reflecting the liturgical season.

But more important ... crucial in fact ... is that I am called to remember that they are not decorations... nor are they status symbols. Rather these stoles represent the yoke that Jesus calls us to put on. His yoke. And I am called... we are all called... to put on his yoke and remember that we are to serve Christ (and therefore others) with a humble heart.

Our robes and stoles and titles, our phylacteries and fringes- they all have their place. Jesus' concern, was and is, how these things can get out of perspective. Jesus' concern, was and is, when anything becomes a substitute for that which we are truly called to: living as disciples and glorifying God.

Our culture sends very mixed messages. The pages of fashion magazines tell us what we should be wearing to fit in with the crowd. Yet at the same time, we are constantly encouraged to stand out, to be individuals, to show what makes us special.

What makes us special is that we are God's. We not only belong to God... we are loved by God. It's as simple as that. And we live out that love by sharing it with others. We are called by Jesus to be brothers and sisters who do not need other humans to decide whether or not we are worthy.

The point of this passage is the true nature of discipleship. And of whom we are disciples. We all have a part in this. As Jesus challenges the Pharisees whose self-importance got in the way, so he challenges us. But Jesus also challenges the weak and the oppressed, who sometimes withdraw from God and neighbor as if they have nothing to offer.

In her book *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women's Experience*, Anne E. Carr writes: "Sin is... the breaking of relationship both with God and with human beings that can take the form of weakness as well as pride in its denial of human responsibility."

We are all called - weak and strong, rich and poor. We are all called to lead our lives in honor of the one true God ... humbly and gratefully obedient to the one ultimate power.

The final, pivotal intention in our story from Exodus is not freedom for the Israelites. It is Yahweh's glory. The final, pivotal intention in our story from Matthew is not to unravel the Pharisees. It is to remind us that God is the one ultimate authority. And we glorify God not by following 613 rules, but by following two: Love God and love your neighbor. "There is no other commandment greater than these." (Mark 12:31)

All of us have leadership roles in one capacity or another. Whether the leader in a corporation, a team, a family, a workgroup... we all have, or will have, leadership roles in our lives. But there is only one supreme leader. There is only one ultimate power. And so my question for this week is, "How is my 'everyday life' a reflection of following the leader?"

Let us pray:

Almighty and Gracious God,

We give thanks for your steadfast love of us.

Help us, guide us to be servant-leaders.

Amen.