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First Presbyterian Church, Athens, Georgia
4th Sunday after Epiphany, January 31, 2021
Text: Luke 6:1-16

The Pharisees

If Jesus were looking for a base, a group of supporters, to form the nucleus of his ministry, the obvious choice would be the Pharisees.ⁱⁱ You grimace. But let me tell you, the Pharisees had the best track record around. Their history showed them to be Jews at their passionate and loyal best. For starters, they were devoted to the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament. They held it in great esteem and were very ardent in their study and application.

Their roots went back to the Exile. While the Jews had no temple nor priests during the Exile, they did have the Law, the Torah. During this time in Babylon, when there were no sacrifices because there was no temple nor need for priests, the Law became the center of their religion and the pattern of Jewish life. And integral to this shift were the scholars, the non-priestly doctors of the Law who taught and applied the Torah among the people. After the exiles returned, these scholars, these lay lawyers continued to play a critical role in Jewish faith and practice. They were the religious ancestors of the party that became known as the Pharisees.

During the two centuries before Jesus, the Pharisees uncompromisingly preserved and reinforced the Jewish identity that the Greeks were determined to stamp out as they Hellenized their empire. The Pharisees were very courageous and fiercely devout. They refused to assimilate. They rejected the Greek idea of “man as the measure of all things.” They held tightly to their faith in their covenant-making, command-giving God. When in 167 BCE, the Seleucid ruler outlawed Sabbath keeping and circumcision on pain of death and a pagan sacrifice to Zeus was offered at the altar of the Jerusalem Temple, an insurgency erupted. The Pharisees were the religious backbone of this Maccabean revolt. When Roman rule supplanted Greek, the Pharisees still stood firm. They were no fans of Herod.

Compared to another prominent religious party, the upper crust, priestly Sadducees, the Pharisees were more grassroots. They were less literalistic and more flexible. The Pharisees were the good church folk of their day, so to speak. They had loyally supported their faith through pressure and persecution. They took the Bible very seriously. It’s true that they had become a little rigid through the years. They could do with a little loosening up, a little reformation. They could have served as a solid base for Jesus to work from. But it’s clear from the gospels that they didn’t. Every time we turn around, Jesus has a run-in with them!

In our text for today from Luke we hear about two such run-ins. In the first, the Pharisees criticize Jesus’ disciples for plucking grain. In the second, they get riled because Jesus healed a man’s hand. It’s not that they were against grain-plucking. Gleaning in others’ fields was certainly permitted. Nor were they against healing. What got their goat was that these events were on the Sabbath. Sabbath observance, was, after all, central to Jewish identity. It was in the Ten Commandments. It was something they had defended for generations. Both the harvesting and healing they considered work, and that is what the Law forbade on the Sabbath.

But Jesus countered their interpretation of the law with his own. For him, need outranked ritual. He defended his disciples by appealing to the example of David and his companions. When they were in need of food, they were given holy bread which according to the Law was to be eaten only by priests. And when the man with the withered hand was in need of healing, Jesus made it clear that doing good took priority over sabbath keeping. Indeed, can one honor God while ignoring human need? Certainly not for Jesus. He put moral action above ritual action.

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So, while our good church folk the Pharisees are to be commended for their piety, they seem to have missed the boat. In their effort to follow the law faithfully, they had come up with all sorts of rules to make the sometimes-vague commands in the Bible more specific. In the case of Sabbath keeping, the Pharisees were so intent on not violating it with work that they spelled out 39 categories of work to avoid. One of their writings opens with the saying, “Make a fence for the law.” That meant protect it by surrounding it with cautionary rules to act as a warning notice to stop people before they get within breaking distance of the God-given law. This led to some pretty absurd laws. A tailor, for example, was not allowed to go out carrying his needle late in the day before the sabbath, in case it was still in his pocket when the sabbath began. Over time, the Pharisees had so many rules and customs that they had become a millstone around the neck of ordinary people. It reminds me of the *Book of Church Order*, whose spine was about ¼ inch thick when I was ordained but over the years grew to about an inch thick. We Presbyterians are fond of our rules and regulations.

Unfortunately, as can happen with rule followers, the Pharisees of Jesus’ day were so obsessed with monitoring the rules that they lost sight of the goal. The goal of the sabbath was for rest and restoration, for wholeness and worship. But the Pharisees’ goal shifted to legalisms about the sabbath and catching offenders. Luke tells us that they had their eyes on Jesus, eager to say “Gotcha!”

It’s like the dynamics that can happen in a family with two children. Any resemblance to my own family is purely coincidental. The parents establish rules for the health, safety, and wellbeing of all. However, one child becomes the self-appointed Pharisee. He makes sure to know and enforce every rule. He becomes an expert in the letter of the law to the exclusion of the spirit of the law. Further, he gets a perverse delight in apprehending and tattling. So, for example, when the parents are out for the evening and the sibling’s cell phone rings with a face time call from the grandparents, the enforcer grabs the phone from his sibling, pushes the hang up button, and declares with glee, “No screen time on school nights. That’s the rule.”

The accumulation of rules and monitoring their adherence had become a rigid exterior armor among many of the Pharisees. They had preserved Jewish identity, but after several hundred years the identity had become more external than internal. Eugene Peterson remarks that the Pharisees had become religious crustaceans: all their bone structure was on the outside.ⁱⁱⁱ

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Additionally, the Pharisees had become small minded. They were majoring in minors. It's like if you had a big, beautiful picture window to look out at a stunning scene of the Rocky Mountains. But a bug flies into the window and leaves a smudge. So, you get out your Windex and paper towels and clean it. Then along come some children: alas, fingerprints. So, you get your bucket and rag. More cleaning. You look up and see dust motes on the glass shimmering in the sunlight, so out come the ladder and squeegee. Yet more cleaning. Before long, you are so obsessed with keeping the window clean that you never bother to gaze at the view.

George MacLeod was the best known and most influential Scottish clergyman of the last century. One of his greatest contributions was liberating the Scottish church from its legalistic Sabbatarianism. The church insisted, for instance, that on Sundays, the Lord's day, the Edinburgh Botanic Gardens should be closed, and trains should not be allowed to run. Since the vast majority of workers had only one day off a week, and that was Sunday, they were essentially denied access to the countryside and in the city, to one of Edinburgh's most beautiful places of nature. MacLeod could see that the larger picture of giving ordinary people a chance to enjoy God's creation on the Lord's day was more important than a strict, hide-bound interpretation of the Fourth Commandment.

However, tending to the bigger picture isn't always our response. MacLeod writes poignantly of an incident that we've all experienced in one way or another.

I was busy. I was writing letters. I was self-important. My little daughter was going to school that morning for the first time. She came into my room, in her first school uniform. I said, "Your tie is not quite straight." Then I looked at her eyes... She was unutterably disappointed. She hadn't come for tie inspection. She had come to show she was going to school for the first time. A terrific day, and I had let her down....I ran downstairs. I said all the right things. I crossed the road with her. I went to school with her. [But] I had missed the moment, missed the point. I will always see those eyes.^{iv}

The Pharisees were rigid rule keepers whose small mindedness caused them to miss the boat.

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Further, the Pharisees were short on compassion. I think this was the unhappy consequence of their extreme emphasis on holiness. The very name, "Pharisee" means separate. Separateness is the essence of holiness. The Pharisees were intent on doing all the things the law required to be holy, or separate, or pure: setting aside a holy day, the sabbath; following the dietary laws that allowed some foods and prohibited others; avoiding contact with religiously unclean people; and so forth. They subscribed to what anthropologists call a purity system. A purity system puts things and especially people in categories: Jew and Gentile, the righteous and sinners, insiders and outsiders. It's the system that helped the Pharisees resist accommodation to Hellenization, which preserved their religion whose God admittedly proclaimed, "You shall be holy for I am holy"^v. Yet it's a small step from considering yourself separate from others to considering yourself superior to them. It's a small step from

endeavoring to be pure and righteous to seeing others as impure and unrighteous and therefore unworthy. It's a small step from righteousness to self-righteousness: I'm right; you're wrong; we don't share the same world; we don't even share common humanity; I have no empathy, no compassion for you.

In our modern, polarized world it's not hard to find this Pharisaical attitude:
The author of *The War for Kindness: Building Empathy in a Fractured World* laments:

More than ever, humans are urban, isolated, and anonymous to each other. We meet irregularly, often in online spaces that privilege outrage and leave cruelty unpunished. We are increasingly tribal, and sometimes view outsiders not as human beings but as symbols of ideas and groups we fear and hate.^{vi}

Looking down from their undefiled pedestals, the Pharisees spared no compassion for Jesus' hungry disciples nor the man with the withered hand. Jesus' declaration just 25 verses later in Luke, "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful"^{vii} would fall on their deaf ears.

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Religious crustaceans with their rigid rule-following, small-minded window washers who failed to see what's truly important, holier-than-thou hard-hearted purists, the Pharisees missed the boat.

Luke tells us that after Jesus' two run-ins with the Pharisees he went out to the mountain to pray. He prayed all night. The next day he chose twelve apostles to be the nucleus of his kingdom work, his ministry of proclaiming Good News. Not one of them--not a single one--was a Pharisee.^{viii}

ⁱⁱ Eugene Peterson, *The Jesus Way*, (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI, 2007), p. 212.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

^{iv} J. Philip Newell, *Listening for the Heartbeat of God: A Celtic Spirituality*, (Paulist Press: New York, 1997), p. 80-81 quoting Ronald Ferguson (ed.), *Daily Readings with George MacLeod*, p. 54-55.

^v Lev. 19:2 and elsewhere

^{vi} https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/in_a_divided_world_we_need_to_choose_empathy on 1/28/21.

^{vii} Luke 6:36

^{viii} But stay tuned; Saul/Paul appears in Acts!