

Ottawa Mennonite Church
Sermon – “Getting out of God’s way”
November 2, 2008
Text: Matthew 23:1-12



When I was growing up there was a popular television series which aired called

The Pretender. The premise is about a young boy, Jarod. He was a child prodigy who was abducted at a young age and raised by a think tank called The Centre. Jarod's handlers at The Centre trained him to be a "Pretender", someone who can integrate himself into any walk of life. Jarod's father figure is Sydney, a Centre psychologist, coached him through simulations which challenged his intellect. When Jarod discovered that the Centre was data mining his simulations for nefarious purposes, he escaped. In one episode Jarod might be a doctor, the next a race car driver, the episode after a dentist, and perhaps the next a parachuter. Jarod moves through the tv series, trying to discover bits and pieces about his past while helping people in the present, and trying to avoid the Centre's bounty hunters.

In *The Pretender* the character Jarod is just that, an actor, a pretender, he is someone who acts the role so well that all are fooled by his acting. Sometimes, when seeing a play, an actor or actress is incredibly believable

in their role. The actor or actress seems so authentic, so genuine, so real that it is hard to comprehend that it is all “make believe.”

The English word, “hypocrite” comes from the Greek word, “hypocresis” which is the Greek word for “actor.” A good “hypocresis” is a good actor. A good actor is good at playing a part, playing a role, playing a character. They are excellent at pretending. In our passage this morning, Jesus calls out the pretenders in the crowd, the actors and let’s them know what he thinks.

Hypocrisy of the Pharisees

In an attempt to breath new life into this passage one author suggests that today’s passage needs to not just be read, but instead needs to be be shouted out. I tend to agree. This passage is filled with emotion, it should not be passively read. I imagine that the setting for this passage, is not a serene hill top with people surrounding Jesus, but instead a busy city street in the midst of Jerusalem. I don’t imagine Jesus to be well rested, or content, waiting patiently for the crowds to gather. No, I instead imagine Jesus as being a little tired, worried, concerned and frustrated. If we look

at what has transpired over the last few weeks, we can see that things have slowly come to a head.

Like pot of water set to boil on the stove, Jesus' patience has been put to the test. Since his entry into Jerusalem Jesus has been in a foul mood. After the triumphant entry back in chapter 21, we read of Jesus clearing the temple, tearing banners down, throwing scales used to trade money all over the place, freeing doves, lambs, and sheep. In some renditions Jesus uses a whip to drive the beasts out of the temple. Jesus also verbally lashes out to all who were selling and buying in the temple:

My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you are making it a den of robbers."¹

The pot begins to steam. The day after this temple tantrum Jesus is walking back into Jerusalem, and feeling a little hungry he approaches a fig tree, now this fig tree was not bearing any fruit, so what does Jesus do? He curses the little tree:

¹ Matthew 21:13

"May no fruit ever come from you again!" And the fig tree withered at once.²

The pot begins to simmer. This is more than just a case of road rage, Jesus has a bone to pick with someone. Jesus next enters the temple, and begins teaching there, in front of the Pharisees, chief priests, and elders. This is where he tells the three parables about the kingdom of God. The parable of the son who changes his mind, the pot gets noisier, the parable of the wicket tenants, it begins to boil, and finally the parable of the banquet.

By the time we reach chapter 23, the pot boils over and Jesus let's loose. There is no filtering, there is no holding back, there is no use of parables, Jesus simply throws down the Gauntlet. There is no pastoral filter here, Jesus simply begins to tell it as it is. He shouts out at the pharisees. He tires of their games, he becomes frustrated by their careful wording, exhausted by their verbal and intellectual dance, Jesus puts an end to it. He calls them on their hypocrisy in front of the people.

-They preach but they do not practice.

-They lay burdens on others shoulders but they do not lift a finger to help.

² Matthew 21: 19

-They do all their deeds to be seen by men.

-They love the places of honor at feasts and greetings in the market places and being called rabbi.

Then Jesus does something that I would not imagine. He turns from the people and turns to the scribes and Pharisees and drops a bomb right in their laps.

NOT JUST THEM BUT YOU TOO...

If we look just a little bit after the lectionary reading for this week, into verses 14 through 36 we see that the gospel text switches from using “they” language to using “you” language. In both English and Greek, there is emphasis on the “you” in each of these statements. Talk about being in your face. Talk about calling a spade a spade. A person can hear the “you”s that drip with sarcastic indictment.

- But woe to **you**, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For **you** lock people out of the kingdom of heaven.
- Woe to **you** Pharisees, **you** blind guides, **you** blind men. Woe to **you**, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!

- For **you** tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith.
- For **you** clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.
- For **you** are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth.
- For **you** build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous,
- For **you** are the sons of those who have murdered the prophets.
- For **you** serpents and brood of vipers, how are **you** to escape being sentenced to hell?³
- **YOU, YOU, YOU!**

This is not a Jesus I am familiar with, this is not a Jesus who we are comfortable with. It does not feel like the Jesus of our imaginations, Jesus meek, mild, and gentle Jesus who would never say anything harsh to anyone. This is not the angelic 'safe' Jesus whom the children climb over, this is not the Jesus whom we have seen in classic paintings with that

³ http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series_a_hypocrisy_of_the_pharisees.htm

serene look on his face, this is not the Jesus who we imagine will one day willingly carry the burden of the cross.

No, this Jesus is worked up, mad, angry, absolutely livid! These words sting. They are meant to cut deep. Jesus is making a point here, and he is being sure that no body misses it. Jesus is telling the Pharisees to get out of his way!

Even as someone reading this two thousand years later, the words are scathing and inditing. They are difficult to read, let alone listen to. Each 'you' feels like it is directed at each one of us personally.

This mad, angry Jesus is someone who we are not comfortable with. We are not comfortable with a Jesus who is angry, a Jesus who is judgemental, a Jesus who identifies faults. We are more comfortable with the Jesus who offers living water, with a Jesus who breaks bread and multiplies fish, with a Jesus who in his last moments on earth pardons the thief. The Jesus that we are encountering here in this passage becomes uncomfortable for us. Especially when we begin to self identify with the Pharisees.

HELLO, I'M CRAIG, AND I AM A PHARISEE

Possibly one of the more startling and more revealing thoughts I have had, was to catch myself admit to myself that I can be like a Pharisee, that sometimes I act, that sometimes I pretend. To realize that in a passage like this, that when Jesus talks to the Pharisees, Jesus is talking to me too. It can be chilling to hear Jesus lambaste the Pharisees, especially when you can identify yourself in this passage. The 'you's become that much more poignant.

Jesus is calling the scribes and Pharisees out, calling them hypocrites to show how much they are acting. They are acting out the faith, but they no longer live out the faith. In the sense of the Greek word, they are hypocrites. They are actors. To them the temple, the church, is a guild, a theatre company. Something to protected, something that must be guarded. You have to have the right credentials to get in, and you need to follow the rules, all the rules, both spoken and unspoke, to stay in and finally you need to act the part.

We are surrounded by actors today. Our entertainment is predicated on actors, even our 'reality' television is filled with actors. Participants in television shows such as Survivor and Big Brother demonstrate for us that it is OK to promise one thing and then do another, this is justified because hey "it's only a game." We accept the two-faced nature of politicians, and even jest about it, on campaign trails, we hear over and over promises designed and crafted to seduce us to vote for one candidate or another, but don't expect any of them to come to fruition. We see their best sides as they campaign for the highest office in the country, but once in, we see another side.

In some way each of us are actors too. How many times in a given day, when asked "how are you?" is the reply, 'fine'. Everything is alright, there is nothing wrong, but deep down, some of us are struggling with loneliness, change, a dark demon in the corner, perhaps we are feeling sad, anxious, worried, pre-occupied, but yet we don't say it. We put on the Sunday morning face, the tough face, the face of confidence, the face that says that nothing is wrong and we act the role. We act like we have it all together. How much are we into the role? How comfortable is the role that we play? By acting we're no better than the Pharisees, we are simply pretenders.

Like the youth reminded me, not an hour ago, Jesus doesn't like posers. Jesus doesn't like pretenders. Pretenders get in God's way. The Pharisees with all of their pride, avarice, righteousness, and ego, didn't make them any better than any one else. It didn't keep them out of Jesus' sights. Their pretending made them more noticeable, because they were acting in a false way.

When we stop pretending, when we stop acting, we begin to be ourselves, that is when God can take over. That is when God can break through. That is when Christ's light will shine. When we get out of God's way, God gets to work. We no longer need to keep up appearances, we don't need to pretend any more. Christ has set us free from trying to make ourselves worthy and acceptable before God. We need to stop acting, stop pretending, and live in the assurance that God's grace is enough, that we can get out of God's way, and let God work.

While there may be pretenders around us, when we choose to stop acting, when we confess our mistakes, when we seek forgiveness, and humble ourselves and submit ourselves to God, and we live in the assurance that

God's grace is enough. We don't need to act like we have it all together then. We don't need to act, God doesn't want actors, or pretenders, God want's us we just need to be, and we need to get out of God's way because when we get out of Gods way God does amazing things.

AMEN.