

“Holy Space...and the Ways of Grace”:  
A Sermon Preached at Knox United Church (Parksville, B.C.)  
on October 30<sup>th</sup> 2011 (20<sup>th</sup> after Pentecost/All Saints Sunday)  
by Foster Freed

Matthew 23: 1-12

I have a distinct memory...even though I'm reaching back some 25 years...I have a distinct memory of my first-year liturgy prof, David HOLETON...I have a distinct memory of David making a comment during one of his lectures, a comment to the effect that those who love the liturgy, those who love the liturgy need to maintain a certain sense of humour in order to *keep on* loving the liturgy. And please note that David is a high-church Anglican...someone who would likely find our way of worship far too loosey-goosey, far too unstructured for his liking. And yet, his high-church Anglicanism notwithstanding, he was quick to point out the inherent humour in some of the liturgical practices in which the church indulges.

And what he had in mind on that particular day —what David had in mind was the especially ironic element found in the traditional Ash Wednesday liturgy; as David pointed out: “You have to have a sense of humour to attend a church service in which the Gospel reading includes Jesus’ instructions...from the Sermon on the Mount...in which he tells his followers not to be like “the hypocrites [who] darken their faces to show others when they are fasting...”

...and then proceed to line up at the front of the church, so that the Priest can darken your face with ashes in order to show that you are fasting.

Lest we indulge in too much smugness on that particular score, I must admit that I have a similar sense this morning. Having just heard that stirring denunciation aimed at those who wear special robes to highlight their religiosity, we immediately place before us a man in a fancy robe who is going to presume to interpret that text for us. And while it may be true that we (unlike some Christians) don't call that man “Father”...

...incidentally, I'm convinced that's what Jesus is getting at here when he says call no-man on earth “father” is not that he's prohibiting us from calling our dads “papa”, but is rather referring to the fact that many religious people (including so many followers of Christ) tend to refer to their religious leaders as “fathers”...

...while it's true that you folks don't call me Father Foster (thank God!) or my partner in crime Mother Hilde...and while the title “minister” is a good one...

...”minister” simply means servant...a title I think Jesus would approve...

...lest we forget, folks like Hilde and I are still referred to as “the Reverend”, a term which—as my friend Bert Ramsey likes to remind me—

literally means: “the one who must be revered!” Yikes! Do you see what I mean...do you see what I mean when I echo...when I echo David Holeton’s sentiment, David Holeton’s sentiment to the effect that you need to have a bit of a sense of humour...certainly a sense of life’s ironies...in order to participate not only in the liturgical life of the Church, but in countless other facets of the Church’s life?

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I can still recall...I can still recall the first time I will have heard this passage from Matthew’s Gospel proclaimed inside of a Christian service of worship. It was the fall of 1978; I was living in Toronto at the time, and had just begun attending Sunday morning worship on a regular, Sunday by Sunday basis. But that particular weekend I was away from Toronto: north of Toronto attending a weekend-long Yoga retreat. When I got back to the city late that afternoon, I was really missing my Sunday church time; given that I had only begun Church going that September, I am still surprised at how quickly the habit had taken root in me. At any rate, I was really missing Sunday worship, and—because I was living just next door to the University of Toronto campus—discovered that the Newman Centre on campus—Newman Centres are Catholic centres located on many University campuses—I discovered that the one on the University of Toronto campus held a late Sunday afternoon service for members of the U of T community. And so I headed over to the Newman Centre on a cool mid-fall afternoon, and ended up as the first person other than the Priest to arrive. He immediately enlisted me as a scripture reader...and I ended up with an Old Testament passage from the prophet Malachi, a passage which includes this rather weighty warning:

*And now, O priests, this command is for you.  
If you will not listen,  
if you will not lay it to heart to give glory to my name,  
says the LORD of hosts,  
then I will send the curse on you and I will curse your blessings;  
indeed I have already cursed them,  
because you do not lay it to heart.*

And so, you see, it was in the context of hearing Malachi’s rather stinging rebuke of the priests, that this small congregation then heard—this time from the Priest’s own lips—this morning’s reading from Matthew.

*Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples:  
“The scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses’ seas;  
therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it;  
but do not do as they do,  
for they do not practice what they teach.”*

Malachi and Matthew...better still, Malachi and our Lord. Denunciation of the priest...denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees! Hardly surprising then...hardly surprising that the Newman Centre Priest—on this particular occasion—began his

homily by saying: “This is not an easy day...this is not an easy day...on which to be a Priest in the midst of the Church.” I can relate to that. This is not an easy day...this is not an easy day...on which to be a religious leader in the midst of the Church. *“Do not do as they do...do not to as they do, for they do not practice what they teach.”* Quite an indictment, isn’t it! *“Do not do as they do...for they do not practice what they preach.”*

On that occasion...33 years ago...the Priest continued his sermon by turning the tables on the congregation. In effect he asked his young group of worshippers (I doubt any of us were over the age of 30)...in effect he asked his young worshippers to look in the mirror. Acknowledging how flawed he and his fellow clergy really were, he challenged us to ponder whether we had done anything—whether we *were doing* anything—to support them in their ministry. As an outsider to the church, I thought it was a fine sermon...one that challenged a young group of Catholic laity to think long and hard about their commitment to their church.

If this morning...if this morning I head in a different direction, it’s not because I think the sermon I heard 33 years ago was wrong-headed, simply that my gut tells me the reality we face here and now is a slightly different reality...one in which you and I together face a context that highlights not the differences but the common ground Christian clergy and laity together occupy: common ground in the midst of a culture that tends to regard all of us as slightly out of our minds. Especially here in British Columbia, where we (we, as in we who are a regular part of the life of the Church) comprise a small minority of the overall population...here in British Columbia we tend to be regarded, if not with hostility, with a fair degree of bewilderment. Puzzlement! Puzzlement...as in: didn’t they get the memo...the one about the utter irrelevance of this church-going business? More problematic...more problematic is the tendency for the media to seize upon...

...and, to be fair to the media, we provide them with no shortage of opportunities for just such seizing...

...more problematic is the tendency for the Church and its leadership to be depicted and regarded as those who say one thing but do another. No different than anyone else in terms of how we live our lives: the presumption tends to be that the real difference lies not in our deeds but in our words. In short: from the perspective of so many who have nothing to do with the church...

...that’s the vast majority, especially among the young...

...from the perspective of the majority who have nothing to do with the church, Jesus’ denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees pretty much sums up how they would tend to regard the likes of you and me. *“Do not do what they do...for they do not practice what they teach.”* And there’s no point protesting that such generalizations are always unfair; such protests are beside the point. I’m not speaking here of the reality; I’m speaking of perceptions: and perceptions are powerful. *“Do not do what they do...for they do not practice what they teach.”* Ouch.

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Hard to resist...hard to resist the impulse to locate a really good public-relations outfit, to try to help us to spruce up our image! Believe me; it's been tried and yes, no doubt it will be tried again. But this morning...especially this morning when we seek to recall and to commemorate the lives of the saints...

...on this morning when, God help us, we are invited to ponder what it means for us to be "saints-in-training"...

...on such a morning it seems especially wrong-headed to focus on our image, at the expense of focusing on the substance of our lives. I doubt St. Francis hired a cracker-jack team of publicists! And I doubt, very much, whether even the shrewdest such team would help us to fasten on to the things that really matter.

And surely it's as plain as the nose on our faces that the thing that really matters has to do with that little knock-out punch Jesus delivers at the end of his denunciation of scribes and Pharisees. *"The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted."* And no: it doesn't take a genius to recognize that the "h" word—humility—humility is at the very heart of the matter: at the very heart of what it means to regard oneself as a disciple...to regard oneself as a "saint-in-training"! The problem being...

...the problem being that "humility", much as is the case with every other virtue, the problem being that humility can be promoted in ways that are actually destructive to human well-being. While it is most certainly the case that we now live in a culture that seems obsessed with teaching children to have a healthy dose of "self-esteem"...and while that obsession has produced young people whose self-regard can, at times, border on sheer narcissism...

...I rather doubt that many of us find ourselves yearning for the good-old-days when children were encouraged—often with a harshness we would nowadays find unacceptable...taught and encouraged to know their place...encouraged and taught not to aspire to rise above their station. Besides: I'm sure we're all familiar with people who present as so obnoxiously humble, that we want to haul off and slug them. Remember Uriah Heap the treacherous character in Dickens' novel *David Copperfield*: he's the real villain of the piece, all the while protesting his desire to be David's 'umble servant. I'm also reminded of Golda Meir's marvellous one-liner: "Don't be so humble...you're not that great!"

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Two images...images I find helpful. Perhaps you will find them helpful as well.

First image: an image that draws upon the roots of the word itself, the word “humility”. It comes from the Latin word *humus*, which simply means “earth”. And I’m reminded of the words I’ll be saying later this afternoon at the memorial service for Edna Thompson: *We are mortal, formed of the earth/and to the earth shall we return.*” Humility, you see, doesn’t require us to put on a big act: doesn’t require us to join Uriah Heap in the ranks of the *‘umble servants!* It does, however, require us...it does require that we remember—without fanfare—that we remember who we are and from whence we came: in short, to remember that we are utterly and radically and yes, wonderfully, dependent upon God for our every breath. *We are mortal, formed of the earth/and to the earth shall we return.* The very act of recalling that stark—but by no means morbid truth—can be transformative in ways great and small. That’s my first image.

The other...the other has to do with the title I’ve given to these somewhat rambling reflections...

Humility begins...saintliness begins...not by preparing a checklist of heroic virtues to which you or I might aspire, and certainly not at that point at which I delude myself into thinking that I am somehow more humble than others, thereby deluding myself into thinking that I am somehow better than others. No: genuine humility—not the false, pretentious sort of humility, but genuine humility begins not with me but with my Maker. Saintliness, genuine saintliness, begins not with me but with my God. I can no more turn myself into a saint—another words I can no more guarantee my own sanctification—than I can start to fly by flapping my arms really hard and really fast. The work of sanctification—the work of turning out a saint—begins precisely at that point at which I determine that there will be, in my life, less of Foster and more of the Holy One. That’s why Christian contemplatives—those who practice deep Christian prayer—try to spend daily time in silence: shutting out not only the world’s noise but their own inner noise, so that God’s voice might be heard in the stillness of the day. You see: whatever else God’s grace seeks to do...

...whatever else God’s grace seeks to accomplish in and through us, it seeks to find a place within each of our lives...

...a space within each of our hearts...

...space enough...space enough for God to begin to claim those hearts and lives—your heart and mine, your life and mine—for the outpouring of sheer goodness...

...the outpouring of sheer self-lessness that is at the heart of the Gospel. Not showy piety. Not long robes and fancy titles. But lived, everyday, down to earth garden-variety self-lessness—caring for God, caring for others—that is at the heart of what it means to be a follower of Christ’s...at the heart of what it means to be one of His sanctified ones...one of His saints.

*Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: "The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted."*

May that word...may that word of sternest warning that is also, quite wonderfully, a word of most generous hope...may that good and faithful word come to life in *our* midst: even here, even now. In Jesus' name! Amen!!

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