

*Shallow Good People*

Luke 13.31-35

February 21, 2016, Lent II

Tim Phillips, Seattle First Baptist Church

Anthem: *Jerusalem*, Felix Mendelssohn

The sopranos and altos of the choir have just sung for us Matthew's version of the text for today from Luke 13. Matthew introduces this lament over Jerusalem with some words about the Pharisees:

*Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you ... but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach."*

This is followed by several warnings to the Pharisees about their hypocritical ways and then comes this lament over Jerusalem you just heard sung.

Luke's version of the lament is almost exactly the same. He too introduces it with a word about Pharisees but, in this case, rather than Jesus warning the Pharisees, the Pharisees warn Jesus:

**Luke 13:31-35**

31 At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, 'Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.'

<sup>32</sup>Jesus said to them, 'Go and tell that fox for me, \*

"Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. [Notice that he doesn't include teaching in this list – he is going to continue *doing* what he is doing -- healing and casting out demons – as opposed to what he says about the Pharisees in Matthew who are fine with teaching but do not *practice* what they preach.] <sup>33</sup>Yet today,

tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed away

from Jerusalem.”<sup>34</sup> Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!<sup>35</sup> See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” ’ [Just in case you might forget where this Lenten journey is taking us, Luke reminds us that we are headed for Palm Sunday and Holy Week and Good Friday.]

It struck me this week that both of these heart-wrenching laments over Jerusalem begin with words about the Pharisees so I want to talk about Pharisees this morning for a couple reasons.

First, because when Christians talk about Pharisees in the gospels it sometimes sounds like thinly-veiled anti-Semitism. Pharisees represent Jewish legalism, judgmentalism, and exclusion while we Christians stand for freedom, love, and inclusion.

Now this insinuation has always bothered me because, as many of you know from first-hand experience, most of what I know of legalism, judgmentalism, and exclusion, I learned in the Christian church.

And that brings me to the second reason I want to talk about Pharisees. It occurred to me somewhere along the way that whatever people in church said about Pharisees, I was in training to be one. I would cringe at the description Jesus gives of them in Matthew 23:

*They tie up heavy burdens on people that are too heavy for them to bear and then are unwilling to lift a finger to move them;*

We don’t dance or drink or smoke or chew,

Or go with girls – or boys – who do.

*They do their good deeds and show off their religious practices to be seen by others; We called it “witnessing.”*

*They love positions of power;  
They cross sea and land to make a single convert and, when converted,  
that person is as much a child of hell as they are;  
They neglect the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and  
faith;  
They say, "If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not  
have taken part with those who shed the blood of the prophets" but, in  
saying this, they testify against themselves because they are the  
descendants of those who murdered the prophets."*

I could give examples of each one of these from my experience in the church.

But here was my conundrum. The people who taught me these things were, for the most part, good people. They did their best to care for their families and their neighbors. They tried to be fair. They were extremely generous. They were totally committed to their understanding of faith.

And honestly, the legalism and judgmentalism and exclusion they taught me made a certain amount of sense in a world that was scary; where change was happening so fast; and where life left you little to hold on to or to count on.

Those of you who read Reza Aslan's book about Jesus know that the times in which Jesus lived were times when the world was a scary place; where change was happening all over; and life left you little to hold on to or to count on.

In that world there were three primary schools of thought:  
*Pharisees* -- primarily teachers from the lower and middle classes who spent their time trying to interpret the tradition in a way that would give everyday people something to hold on to;  
*Sadducees* from the wealthier privileged class whose religious and political connections made them accommodate imperial power;  
And *Essenes* who abandoned the corrupt religious system altogether.

While the gospels seem to be pretty hostile toward the Sadducees and generally silent about the Essenes, Jesus spends a lot of time with the Pharisees. As Aslan says, he dines with them, debates with them, and stays with them. Some are identified as followers of his who helped to bury his body and tried to protect his disciples after his death. And Aslan specifically points to this text in Luke 13 to show that there were Pharisees who tried to warn Jesus about the plot to kill him.

Pharisees may have had their problems but they were good people who got caught in the middle -- not wanting to accommodate the culture on one hand and not abandoning the tradition on the other.

That brings me, this Sunday morning of Black History Month, to Dr. King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail."

As I was reading this story in Luke 13 and thinking about the Pharisees – those good people that try to warn Jesus away from his extreme actions – I couldn't stop thinking about Dr. King's letter to 8 white liberal clergy.

While these were good folks who had done some important things on behalf of de-segregation in the city, they had signed a statement warning Dr. King that the civil rights demonstrations in their city were "unwise and untimely." And they inferred that the accusation that Dr. King was an outside troublemaker was true.

I have read this letter several times this week and I find it frighteningly true to the times we find ourselves now. In fact, I have made 20 copies of the letter for those who want to take it home today. The original copy was entrusted to me by my friend John Doty who, as I was reminded yesterday, was a great friend of Peter Koshi. The two worked together at Seattle Central Community College. I saw John at the memorial service for Peter yesterday at Japanese Baptist Church.

I am proud to point out that the copy I have was published by the American Baptist Convention back in the 60s as a study document that was sent to all the American Baptist churches in the country with the encouragement that churches should spend time talking about it and finding ways to act on it.

As I read the letter again, I started to feel my discomfort rising. I wanted the Dr. King of “I Have a Dream.” I wanted the Dr. King of the Beloved Community.

But in this letter, what you get is the Dr. King who is disappointed in people like me – good people who just don’t seem to have it in them to stand alongside those who are suffering and shoved to the edges of life.

This is what he says:

*Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will.*

Shallow good people are more of a threat to the progress of civil rights than the outright violence of bad people.

The problem with a Pharisee like me is not that I am not a good person. I am. I try to be. I want to be a good guy. That’s not the problem. The problem is that I sometimes don’t want to look too deeply at the world or other people or my own life. The superficial is easy – especially if the status quo benefits me.

And then prophets come along. And maybe because I’m a good person I don’t advocate killing them. But I might try to warn them off their extreme behavior. Because of my own discomfort, I might try to give them pointers about how they could be so much more effective if they toned it down. And, in the end, I might try to co-opt them or domesticate their message if it reinforces just how good a person I am. Sometimes I think that’s exactly what we have done with Dr. King.

Dr. King is great so long as he doesn't make me actually have to look more deeply into the ways that my own actions – or inactions -- have contributed to the brokenness of the world.

Now, frankly, I should know better. My tradition taught me better than that.

I remember when I was baptized at a very young age – probably too young an age. But, when it came to religion, I was a precocious kid and I knew all the answers I was supposed to give. And I really wanted to be baptized. I was a good person and, in my world, that's what good people did.

So that summer Sunday evening came and we all piled into the big yellow bus that took us to the lake – that's where real baptisms happened back then. We gathered at the shore and my mom played hymns on an old pump organ. There were a couple people before me and then I stepped into the water.

My dad – the pastor of our little Calvary Baptist Church in Marshall, Michigan– was standing out further in the lake so I started walking toward him. When I got about waist-deep, I stopped -- thinking that this should be plenty of water to baptize me.

My dad didn't move. He called out from further out in the lake, "Come out deeper."

Just so you know, the logistics of immersion are more complicated than you might think. You have to be in enough water to submerge a person's body and it almost doesn't matter how big that person is. There is a critical depth you need to make that happen.

So, I walked out until the water was mid-way up my chest. I stopped. Dad yelled, "Come out deeper."

Okay, so now I'm getting afraid. This whole baptism thing was a great idea until it started looking like I would drown in the process.

I moved forward a few feet. The water was at my shoulders now. Certainly this was far enough. But there was that voice again, "Come out deeper."

I moved forward until I had to tip my head back so that my nose was just sticking out of the water. I felt my dad slip his arms around me and say: "Tim Phillips, do you take Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior."

There were gurgling sounds and then, "I do."

"On that profession of faith I now baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit." And down I went. And up I came. And I shot back to that shore as fast as I could go.

In the more than 50 years since that day, I can still hear my dad calling out over the water, "Come out deeper." Out over the fear. Out over the rising water that was sure to drown me. Out from that distance ahead of me – now from beyond the horizon of eternity – I can still hear that voice echoing inside of me, reminding me that I don't really want to be a shallow good person. There is a voice that is calling me to come out deeper.

Often when I am telling people about Seattle First Baptist Church I say: "They are good people." And you are.

But today there is a voice that is calling all of us to come out deeper.

And today, if you hear that voice, do not harden your hearts.

#### NOTES

Led by our Theologian-in-Residence, Dr. Bill Malcomson, we did a study series of Reza Aslan's *Zealot: the Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* (Random House, 2013), see pp. 21 & 99.