

“Losing Your Religion”
Matthew 23:1-12
Gordon Wiersma 10/30/11

It took me awhile in life to notice this, but Jesus seems to have a real problem with religious people – have you ever noticed that? In my younger days, I often took pleasure in the times when Jesus would take on and take it to those Scribes and Pharisees (and you could often throw in some Sadducees too). That happens quite often in the Gospels, and I enjoyed those stories because I always knew that I was on Jesus’ side against those religious fat-cats – go Jesus! Until at some point it dawned on me that I was one of those people – a religious kind of person. That’s what it took me awhile to notice – that in the stories where Jesus is railing on the religious folks, I wasn’t on Jesus’ side, I was the kind of person Jesus was taking on. Perhaps it was becoming a minister that finally caused that light bulb to flicker on for me – when it was quite obvious that ‘religious establishment’ was a label I could not avoid. When Jesus has a problem with religious people in his day, I am one of the modern day descendants of his target audience. And I have found that to be an important, helpful, challenging, uncomfortable, fruitful insight to have, as I listen to those frequent exchanges between Jesus and the religious.

And today, you get to join me – I am including you in the religious establishment – I am pigeon-holing you as religious people along with me – all of

us as the target of Jesus' ...what would you call it ... teaching/ tirade/ warning/ wisdom?...about religious people. What I am saying is that when this story begins: "Jesus said to the crowds and the disciples..." – that is not us – Jesus is not talking to us; Jesus is talking about us: the religious people. Do you get that? I just want to make sure, because I don't think that's usually how we listen; Jesus is talking about us – the religious establishment. So then who is Jesus talking TO? Who are the crowds and disciples? That's a good question...we'll get to that...

But for now – let's see what Jesus says about us:

"The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; ³therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. ⁴They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. ⁵They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long..."

Here is my paraphrase: 'Religion can carry the faith through the generations – there is truth there to learn and follow. But it is usually best not to follow the leaders.

What religious people do is pile expectations onto others but never really show a way to fulfill them; their main concern is just looking like good religious people so they can stay in charge.'

Now if you are like me, you find yourself nodding your head in agreement to this... ‘umhuh – that is so true about those people!’ – except...: we are the people Jesus is talking about! – remember? That’s a challenge for me to hear – really? Shucks – I don’t like being the hypocritical religious establishment. But I really believe that until we CAN hear Jesus talking about us – facing us down as religious people – we won’t be able to fully hear this story. I want to give some specific examples of what that looks like: Jesus talking about us in that way – but first let’s just say we accept it – that we are part of the religious problem Jesus is addressing – OK?

Good!...because once we do that, THEN we can also hear that Jesus IS talking TO us – that we are also the crowds and the disciples in this story, standing with Jesus’ critique of religion gone wrong. That’s a relief to me, and clearly a more comfortable vantage point in this story. But let’s just remember that we have to stand in BOTH roles to really hear this story – with and against Jesus; Jesus with and against us. And what I want to do on a Reformation Sunday with a multicultural emphasis on music inspired by South Africa, is to take us through a religious narrative that uses both of those vantage points – being part of the religious establishment and against it – and see where that story lands us today.

So it's the 1500s, and the western church, the Roman, Catholic church is full of theological distortion, political corruption, and social hypocrisy. In Europe, some people from within and soon separating from the Roman Church, passionately express a need for reform and renewal – Luther, Calvin, Knox – scripture, grace, faith – it's a Reformation! Lutheran churches, Reformed and Presbyterian churches, all have a new lease on Christian life – an opportunity to cast off the burdens of religious establishment and free people to live in gratitude to God's grace. That's us – we're the Reformers – Jesus is with us – we're the good guys.

Our branch of the Reformation blossomed in the Netherlands – the Dutch. In the 1600s, some of those Dutch immigrated to southern Africa, and they brought their Reformed religion with them. Skim through a few centuries of political, economic, and religious history, and you'll find yourself in the 1900s in South Africa in an Apartheid state – a nation in which white supremacy over the black/colored majority is put in place politically but undergirded theologically by the Dutch Reformed Church. That's us – Jesus is against us – ours is a faith, a theology, with the capacity to institutionalize racism, injustice and hatred – we're the bad guys.

Closer to the close of the 20th century, you'll find the very people of color who were taught their Christianity by this corrupted system, become those who dismantle the theological heresy and social injustice of apartheid – and they are joined by whites too seeking to unburden the church from its own suffocating weight of religious hypocrisy. From out of a most unlikely womb is birthed the stunning truth and beauty of the Belhar Confession, calling the church to confession and healing through the gifts and challenge of Unity/ Reconciliation/ Justice – and in partnership with other religious and secular allies, apartheid is dismantled. This was us too – this was the Reformed Church too – Jesus is with us – we're the good guys.

Today we will use the Belhar Confession to voice our faith – the RCA in 2010 affirmed the Belhar as its own – aren't we great?! – although... it did take 20 years of discussion and a denominational vote that passed by a whisker-thin margin to approve it...so some humility is necessary in our self-congratulation. So then what about the RCA? Is Jesus with us or against us? I could give examples of both – of ways I believe the RCA is living out the gospel and ways the RCA is a blockade to the Spirit of Christ... but it would be more fruitful, I think, to ask the question about ourselves – about Hope Church.

Because if I were to just list some RCA issues – women’s leadership and worship and inclusivity around sexual identity – I believe Hope Church is on the good side of things – that we are with Jesus in speaking against empty religion. And that’s good – I like affirmation – I like Jesus. But that can so easily flip into self-congratulation, elitism, judging. And that’s why I think if we are to ask ourselves, Hope Church, about the words of Jesus speaking against us or for us – it is best not to look at issues, but best instead to have the Belhar Confession doing the asking.

Because what the Belhar asks of us is this: Unity – Reconciliation – Justice – that’s what it has us ask of ourselves: ‘how are we...how can we live out Unity – Reconciliation – Justice as followers of Jesus Christ – as part of the body of Christ?’ Those are Reformed/reforming questions for our day. Because when those things are our question and calling, then it can’t just be about what side of what issues we are on. It is a question/call about how in all things, we live out Unity – Reconciliation– Justice. That is a profound reformed/reforming call in our time. And I think it’s so profound because it came to us from a context in South Africa in which Jesus was both against and for the church – which is really how it always is for THE CHURCH – for this church – for any of us. The Spirit of Christ always BOTH judges and affirms us – which calls us to a truth deeper than for or against –

it calls us to: Unity – Reconciliation – Justice. It's the reformed/reforming question and call of our day.

It gives us much to do...to be...to wonder about...to learn...a lot – but the thing is, I think that Jesus tells us how to do it all:

But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students.⁹ And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven.¹⁰ Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah.¹¹ The greatest among you will be your servant.

...which I would paraphrase as: 'it is not through your own wisdom, or smarts, or good arguments, or Reformed doctrines, or even wonderful Confessions that you will find the faithful way; it is by listening to God and God alone telling you what to do with all of those things: to serve – be a servant – service is the only way.'

How do we show the truth of our doctrines: service; how do we show the rightness of our positions? service; how do we live out our confessions? service; how do we face our opponents – pray for them (that's service); how do we overcome evil? – service. The service of action, of prayer, of grace, of deeds – that is how we stay in the place of Jesus talking to us rather than against us – the place of losing our religion and finding the faith of a servant: service that God will shape into something in the world that looks like this: unity – reconciliation – justice. Thanks be to God. AMEN.