

Hear now the words of the Gospel, taken from Matthew chapter 23:1-12

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 and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. They 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. They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father – the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah.

The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

May God add a blessing to our hearing and understanding of these words.

Pray with me: Holy and loving God, may the words of my mouth and meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

So how many of you watched the last few games of the World Series this last week? Did you watch Game Six? Indulge me a little bit here. For those who didn’t watch it, this is about as exciting as baseball ever gets. By the bottom of the ninth inning, it’s been a long game – we’ve seen the Cardinals AND the Rangers make some errors, miss some catches, watch good strikes go by. The Cardinals are down two runs. There are two people on base, two outs, and the St. Louis home town boy, David.... FREESE steps up to the plate. I have high hopes as he steps up, but then one strike goes by him and another. One strike away from losing the World Series.

Have you ever felt like that? Like you were one strike away from losing it all whatever it all is? Like you’d worked hard but messed up one too many times and so why even try? That’s how I feel when I hear Jesus’ words about the scribes and the Pharisees: “Do whatever they teach you,” he tells the crowds, “but do not do as they do for they do not practice what they teach.” Jesus’ criticisms of the hypocrisy of these religious leaders are three-fold: first, they say one thing and do another. Second, they put heavy burdens of work and responsibility on others while shirking their

own share of responsibility. Finally, they do good things for the wrong reasons: they want people to see their deeds, to acknowledge and praise them. They desire popularity and recognition from the people around them.

Why does this scripture make me feel like I'm up to bat in the last inning of an important game with two outs and two strikes? Well, because I find myself relating pretty well to those scribes and Pharisees. Here I am preaching pretty regularly about what it means to love our neighbors and our God. I talk about reaching out to our brothers and sisters who are poor and the needy. I speak about the need to care for our environment, conserve resources, be careful about how we treat the earth. I encourage political involvement and proclaim the need for social justice. These are fine ideals, good ideals to have. But all too often, I find myself falling short of these ideals. I find myself preaching something that I do not practice. I know all too well the desire for popularity and recognition. I am a class A people-pleaser (it's one of the reasons I LOVE being here – because you all are so affirming of me, and I crave that recognition, affirmation and praise). And honestly, all too often, I am so busy worrying about who other people want me to be, or what other people will see, or who I THINK I'm supposed to be that I don't step back to be the person that GOD has made me to be. I'm so busy trying to please other people that I'm not making sure that my relationship with God is how it ought to be. I'm so

worried about these other things that I'm not orienting my heart and life towards God.

These are not easy things for me to tell you. It's not easy to say: here's the person you see, here's the confident woman that you are coming to know, and really there's a lot of insecurity in there. There's a lot of fear that I am not who you want me to be, or I am not who I am supposed to be. It's scary to tell you that all too often I do not practice what I preach. And when I think about that, when I think about who I think I'm supposed to be and who I am I feel like I'm facing that pitcher with two outs and two strikes against me, one strike away from losing, from losing something, though I can't quite put my finger on what.

Perhaps you know this feeling. Perhaps you know what it feels like to hold an ideal and then to know that you can't or don't always live up to it. I was in a conversation with someone yesterday, and he said to me, well, isn't that the point of our ideals? That we reach for them but that we also have ideals that are high enough that we're always reaching? After all, what would we do if we finally reached those ideals? What would we live for? I've got to admit that he has a point, a point that I think David Freese would understand. For he stood on that home plate, one strike away from losing the World Series, and he understood that he's still reaching. He also understood that he had another pitch coming.

And this is where there's good news for me, for the scribes and the Pharisees, for the crowds listening to Jesus, good news for all of us. While it's easy to get caught up in the ways in which we fall short, the ways in which we do not practice what we preach, while it's easy to want to give up, there's good news. Because there's another pitch coming. God loves us as God's own beloved children. In today's scripture, Jesus tells us, we need call no one on earth father (or mother) for we have our Father and Mother in heaven. We are children of God. We are known, we are heard, we are acknowledged and we are loved as we are, made in the image of God, mess-ups and all. And God who loves us is always ready with that next pitch; is always ready with another chance for us to orient our hearts and lives toward God.

Orienting our hearts toward God. As I thought about this, I could not help but think of Matthew 6:21. Jesus says to the crowds gathered to hear him preach: “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Jesus does not say, “where your heart is, there your treasure will be.” No, he told us that where we put our treasure, there our heart will follow. I know where I would **like** my heart to be: I would **like** my heart to be with God, I would **like** my heart to be here with my church family, I would **like** my heart to be with my brothers and sisters in need. “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Jesus tells us that if we know where we

want our hearts to be, we need to put our treasure, those things we value, there: our money, our time, our talents, our true selves.

As we make our pledges to the church, as we commit to give to the church in the coming year, let us remember that where we put our treasure, there our hearts will be also.

God orients Godself to us by giving us God's treasure: God's son, to live among us, to laugh and cry, to love and teach, to suffer and die among us, just as we do these things. As we come to the table to receive this gift, we are reassured that indeed, God's heart is oriented toward us. God loves us as God's own children.