

**Message Delivered at Christ Church  
Saturday & Sunday, October 29<sup>th</sup> & 30<sup>th</sup>, 2011**

**TEXT: Matthew 23:1-12**

Delivered by Paul A. Johnson

\*\*\*\*\*

So every good story has to have a conflict. If there is no conflict or tension, then it's not going to be much of a story.

The gospel that we read from every weekend is, of course, a story. It's not just a story. It's Jesus' story, and our story, and the story. But it remains a fact that when the first persons decided to write about Jesus, they decided to write about him by telling this story. And if a story is to be a story that means there's got to be a conflict.

Right now, we're reading from Matthew's gospel. We're near the end of the gospel...chapter twenty-three...and we're approaching the story's exclamation point of the cross; and the conflict that's been brewing is coming to a head.

As we come to what we heard Jesus say today, the dust is settling from a battle that's been going on. Jesus is in Jerusalem, and the cross is nearby. From the moment he arrived in town, he's been turning things topsy-turvy. The first thing he did when he arrived in Jerusalem is go into the temple courts and make a ruckus. He drove out the people who were buying and selling in the temple; he overturned the tables of the people who exchanged Roman money for Jewish money so pilgrims could make their offering. And then while he was still in the temple, the blind and the lame came to him for healing. And that made the chief priests and the scribes angry.

Now he had been making the religious leaders angry for some time before he entered Jerusalem. To this point, the actual people haven't turned on him yet. But some of the religious leaders—they aren't seeing eye to eye with him. They'd heard what he'd said, they'd seen what he'd done.

But now, in Jerusalem, he was on their turf. So they bring their best game. First, they challenge him on the authority of his teaching, a question he deftly turns back on them. Then, a question about paying tribute to Caesar to try to trap him. The Sadducees give him a puzzle to solve about a woman, seven brothers, and who is married to whom in heaven. And then last week, a challenge on what matters most in the Law, to which Jesus answers "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and soul, and strength, and mind; and your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

And I'm telling us all this because that's what's going on when Jesus says these words. This is not a pretty time in the gospel story. This is not a lovey-dovey place. This is a battle; this is Jesus going toe-to-toe with some very smart people...smart not because they know the scriptures so well, which they do...but smart because they understand better than most how what Jesus is doing and teaching is turning everything upside down. Jesus teaches that the Law is all about love. Many of them think it is God's way of saying who is in and who is out. Those aren't the same thing. And when you turn something upside down, the people on the top don't always care for it very much.

Sometimes it's helpful to remember that Jesus didn't go to the cross because everybody agreed with him and thought he was a nice guy. He went to the cross because what he taught about the Kingdom in his words and in his actions was so radical that those who had the power

and influence to send him to the cross were threatened by him. He went to the cross because he offered a new way, and not everybody thought it was the way to go.

If you're a scribe or a Pharisee overhearing what we heard Jesus say today to the crowd and the disciples, you're not going to be very happy. Scribes and Pharisees were both students of the Law. Matthew doesn't like them very much, but not all of them were bad guys. At their best, they were seekers of understanding and teachers of faithfulness. But as much as any of us they could lose sight of what matters, and use something that God had given them for their own purposes.

So one more time—to the crowds and the disciples, with the scribes and Pharisees still listening in--Jesus paints a picture of how what God intends for us is so dramatically different than what we know...

There are plenty of heavy burdens in life. The Gospel is not intended to be one of them. Too often do we human beings like to place heavy burdens on one another. That's a fancy way of saying that too often...sometimes overtly, sometimes unconsciously...we too often teach and act as if God's love and good favor depends upon something...depends upon believing certain things, or doing certain things, or behaving a certain way. Too often, we make it sound as if the Gospel is a puzzle, or a riddle, or a code to be figured out...and that when we finally get it figured out God will smile upon us...and then, because people want to be right, we wear ourselves slick trying to get it right.

But the first word is always God's love and mercy. The Gospel is Good News, not a heavy burden. It is a joyful and abundant and released life God intends and gives. Jesus didn't come to make our "to do" list longer, or make us busier, or make life crazier or more hectic...as if we needed help from the Son of God to do all that. We seem to do that pretty well ourselves. He came to set us free. Elsewhere Jesus says "Come unto me all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." He meant it when he said it.

None of which means we believe anything, or are free to do anything. We all know that. It just means that what's first is that God is generous, and giving, and loving, and merciful, and seeks for us to be tall and courageous and strong for the Lord because every heavy burden has already been lifted...not by us, but by him.

The Lord knows that life isn't always easy. That there are slings and arrows. Life is sometimes complicated, and decisions aren't always easy, and situations—or people, even—are not always friendly to the life we seek to live. There are enough burdens in life. The Gospel shouldn't be another one.

You know, every time we're together like this, we all bring our stuff to the table. Sometimes, we arrive here with weights and worries. But our hope is that we leave with a bounce in our step. I hope we leave encouraged and assured and confident that whatever lies before us this week, God is walking with us...not because we've been good enough, or virtuous enough, or faithful enough to earn it; but because it is the truth about how God is. My hope is that somehow, when we walk to our cars after worship we are lifted up...because God is good, and Jesus wants our steps to be light; that's what he teaches, through what he says and what he does.

He is the one instructor. And he is the one rabbi. "Rabbi" is a title that in the scriptures sometimes people gave to Jesus. The root of the word "rabbi" is "rab," which means "great." Over time, the word rabbi has come to mean teacher. But in its earliest form, it meant "great

one.” Well, there is for us only one rabbi, and that’s the one who defined greatness as going to a cross.

And there is for us one father, and that’s God. Now what Jesus says here doesn’t mean that we can’t call our earthly fathers father. And I grew up in a part of the Episcopal Church where we called the priest “father.” That’s what I was taught to call the priest in my church. And I sometimes get the question from people what they should call me. Now you can call me pretty much anything you want...just don’t call me “late for dinner...” I’m really quite happy when someone just calls me by name...

But what Jesus says here is that I can’t demand that you call me something else...none of us can...because in the Kingdom we’re all students; we’re all on the journey; and we’re all a lot more alike than we think. So if God knows us by name, and speaks to us on a first name basis, then maybe we can be on a first name basis with one another.

Titles work in lots of places. But among God’s people, we don’t demand them because we’re all in the same boat; because we’re all called to serve before being served by the One who came to serve; and because we have one rabbi—the Messiah—who defined greatness with a cross.

And we’ve got one father, and it’s God. The word the early Church knew for father was “abba.” It’s Aramaic, not Greek. It was an important word...so important that even though the New Testament was written in Greek, in plenty of places they retained the Aramaic original. It is an intimate word for father; kind of like “papa.” And that’s why it matters, because it speaks to the revolutionary intimacy Jesus taught that exists between us and God. We can dare to use the most intimate language we can to refer to our relationship with God, because Jesus said we could.

We’re going to walk all sorts of different places this week. Some of them easy and normal, and some of them not. There were two stories in the paper yesterday morning about two little boys...one lost in the wilderness, and one stuck under a pile of rubble...who are now both found and free. Well, we are found, and we are free. And while it may be straight and level for us this week, it also may be a week in which we find ourselves wandering around lost, or feeling so much under it that there seems no way out of.

Well, one more time, in the midst of this great conflict in the story, Jesus reminds us that God is always near, and the Kingdom is always close; that in those places where we are humbled the Lord is at our shoulder, and ready to exalt to the life of trust and love, and freedom and strength, and faithful service that God intends.

The scribes and Pharisees listening in...they probably don’t like the idea too much that God works this way.

But we do.

Yes, we do.