

## **Proper 26A – October 30, 2011**

### **Matthew 23: 1-12**

#### **The Rev. Newell Graham**

Boarding the train and riding up to the “big city of Cincinnati” was really exciting! So much to see and so much to do! But, I can still remember how good it was to come home to Cynthiana and to everything I knew so well. Come to think of it, that was what I most loved about Cynthiana, its predictability. Maybe some of you have similar feelings about life where you grew up.

Predictability...A good example of this was what us kids did on Saturdays, our one real day off. There was school Mondays through Fridays and church was a requirement for most of us on Sundays. Why, some of us even had to go back to church on Sunday evenings! So that left Saturdays, and Saturdays in Cynthiana were predictable. We would all be at the Saturday afternoon movies, B-Westerns mostly. And, predictably, we'd all enjoy the show even though the plots were mostly the same.

One thing I remember is how easy it was to identify the bad guys in those movies. It's true that most wore black cowboy hats, but, it was not just that; there was more. The looks on their faces, the way they talked as they plotted their schemes, one after another, most directed at defrauding or otherwise victimizing the good, law-abiding, God-fearing towns. Yep! We always knew who the bad guys were and our reaction was predictable...We hissed and booed as if those characters being projected on the silver screen could actually hear us!

We all knew who the bad guys were in those movies. I believe that even the most casual reader of the New Testament would be able to identify the “bad guys” in the story of Jesus. They just keep showing up over and over again. “They” are the scribes and the Pharisees. I like this way of describing these “predictable Biblical guys”: “they were Jerusalem’s elite, doctors of the Law whose

long years of study made them the official interpreters of God's word. They were the religious professionals." Thus, it is that the gospel for today as Jesus saying that the teaching done by the scribes and Pharisees is sound – they know the material. The catch is that there's a gap between what they say and what they do. Jesus puts it this way, "do whatever they teach and follow it, but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach."

All of us, if we can dare to be truly honest, must acknowledge the gap between what we say and what we do. We're not even close to being perfect and that gap is there for all the world to see. It is as predictable as a stage coach robbery in the Saturday afternoon Westerns many of us loved. But, those movies were just for fun and we enjoyed them as such. The Biblical bad guys, the scribes and the Pharisees, with their yawning gaps between what they taught and what they did were anything but fun.

The Pharisee's entire outlook on religion had one fundamental effect: religion became a burden, often, an almost intolerable burden. Rules, regulations, and prohibitions – this was their total interpretation of what religion was all about. Rules replaced relationships. This was their norm. This was predictable.

Sadly, the practice of their religion remains that way for many people today. The two great commandments Jesus gave to us about loving God with one's whole heart and mind and soul, and loving others as you love yourself are almost drowned out by rants about rules and regulations. This yields a sad consequence: people obsessed with rules seldom seem happy as they manage the gaps between what they say they believe and what they do, with excuses like "I'm only human" and "Nobody's perfect".

Well, here's a test of any presentation of religion – does the practice of religion give one wings to lift one up, or is it a dead weight to drag one down? Is religion a source of joy or depression? Is a

person helped or hurt by religion? Does religion close the gap? Does it give encouragement when it comes to actually living our professed faith in a joyful way?

Now, of course, nobody knows for sure how Jesus looked, but as I have told you before I always imagine Jesus laughing easily. And these were not timid, tenuous, laughs, but hearty, belly-laughs. Years ago, someone was kind enough to give me a print of an artist's drawing of Jesus. In it he is laughing and there is a sparkle in his eye. I like looking at it so much. He is a wonderful, happy friend.

I love to hear people laugh at church. Smiles are always appropriate in worship. I believe we should approach our religion joyfully because we believe that God has invited us into a relationship of joyful commitment and wondrous benefit. Yes, it is serious, but "serious" doesn't have to be "mournful". I'm not a profound thinker and so I like to "bottom-line" things in a way I can appreciate and understand. It just seems to me that God has gone to an awful lot of trouble to offer us salvation and that it makes no sense at all to conclude that being a Christian means to be dreary and humorless. That just makes no sense to me at all.

Our worship here together is gloriously, blessedly, happy and predictable. Every time we gather, we remember the saving action of Almighty God on our behalf. We realize that God's reason for becoming one of us in the Person of His Son, Jesus, was how very much He loves each and every one of us. We realize how much he gives us in spite of our repeated gaps between saying and doing. In a predictable way, we sing about this great love, we pray gratefully about this and then, we have a party – a dinner party – to cap it all off! We really and truly celebrate it!

Our dear lord himself promised us that when we do all this, and particularly the Holy Meal, the "divine dinner party", we are united with Him in a wonderfully real, intimate, and predictable way; a way we can count on. I can't even imagine my life without these weekly dinner parties with you, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ. We take joy in one another's good times, we bear one another's

burdens, especially sickness and loss, and we take strength to reach out to others outside these walls. There's a pure joy in all of this that I find wonderfully predictable. How about you?

Oh, and did you hear the one about the minister, the priest, and the rabbi on a life boat? Maybe some other time...

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit – Amen.