

Who Were the Pharisees?
Outline of a Word for All Ages
Pilgrim Church Lexington
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Mark 12: 13-17

13 Then they sent to him some Pharisees and some Herodians to trap him in what he said. ¹⁴And they came and said to him, 'Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not? ¹⁵Should we pay them, or should we not?' But knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, 'Why are you putting me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me see it.' ¹⁶And they brought one. Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' They answered, 'The emperor's.' ¹⁷Jesus said to them, 'Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.' And they were utterly amazed at him.

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Do you have any friends who are not Christian? Yes? That's awesome!

One of the principles we try to live by at Pilgrim Church is respect for all faiths and people of all faiths. We want, as individuals and as a congregation, to be friends to people of many faiths.

That doesn't always come up on Sunday mornings. But this season of Lent it's something we're focusing on.

So...what do we know about how to treat our friends?

Kindness, support, check in when people are hurting, be upstanders,

And...don't tell bad stories about your friends.

Okay, here's where we get to our scripture passage this morning. It starts with this line:

"they sent to Jesus some Pharisees"

Who's heard of Pharisees in the Bible? From what you've heard, are they good or bad?

Well, I want to set things right. We've been telling some bad stories about our friends. That includes me - I've done this sometimes in my sermons.

I've been doing some research.

Let me tell you what I've learned about the Pharisees.

They were faithful Jewish teachers.

They were forerunners of rabbinic Judaism - which is the kind of Judaism most of our Jewish neighbors today practice.

They were scholars of something called the oral Torah - which is a commentary on the Jewish Bible.

They were very much admired in the Jewish community of Jesus' day.

Now, here's something else that's important to know. Did you know? Jesus was Jewish. One way we can think about Jesus and the Pharisees is that they were all working to help the people

understand a shared scripture and understand how God wanted them to live. They were reinterpreting scripture and working to understand their faith in a changing world.

So the Pharisees were very influential in what became modern Judaism. And the followers of Jesus took another path, focusing on Jesus and his teachings.

Now, sometimes, Jesus and the Pharisees disagreed. These were like family disagreements. But because the gospels were written by Christians, they highlight those disagreements. Sometimes in the gospels the Pharisees are greatly admired - sometimes Jesus disagrees with them.

The problem is, over two thousand years, Christians have sometimes taken the stories of those disagreements and turned them into stereotypes about everyone whose Jewish. It kind of goes, oh, those self-righteous Pharisees! And then, it turned into Jesus versus Judaism - which makes no sense because Jesus was Jewish and Christianity branched off from Judaism.

So when we hear stories about the Pharisees - or stories about our Jewish neighbors - I want us to pledge to remember two things.

The Pharisees were faithful Jewish teachers - who sometimes agreed and sometimes disagreed with Jesus - but they all wanted good for the people.

And

We, as Christians, are called to be kind and respectful and supportive of people of all faiths, including our Jewish neighbors.

Let's pray.

Jesus,

Teach us your ways in all things.

Teach us to love God with all our heart, mind and strength,

And teach us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

This day, teach us especially how to love our neighbors of other faiths. Amen.

(Many of the points shared in this reflection are drawn from the chapter on the Pharisees in Marilyn Salmon's book *Preaching Without Contempt: Overcoming Unintended Anti-Judaism*.)