New Hope Global Sermon March 28 2021

**Introduction:**

In rereading the first half of Matthew’s Gospel today, the religious conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees kept surfacing. On the one hand was Jesus, demonstrating compassion and authority in His continual efforts to call people to God’s life and salvation. On the other hand were the Pharisees with their rigid thinking about who the promised Jewish Messiah would be. These religious rulers were products of the traditions that had formed around those cherished expectations by generations before them. So, when Jesus kept working outside their prescribed traditions from a different perspective, they dismissed all his teachings, refused to acknowledge the power and goodness of God in his miracles, and within the first year of his public ministry began to plot to kill him (Mt. 12:14). Even though the prophecy of the Messiah quoted by Matthew in ch. 12 described the Messiah as the One God loves, the One who is anointed by the Spirit, the One who proclaims justice and supports the broken and bruised by society, the Pharisees couldn’t acknowledge these realities because their hearts were hardened by their theology and self-appointed role 9and resultant power) as the religious rulers of their nation.

Such fundamental conflicts have persisted in all nations, religions, governments and ideologies today. And the U.S. in 2021 is not exempt.

**Think Again**

In the book I am reviewing this week, ***Think Again,*** Adam Grant describes such boxed-in thinking. He says: “People resist rethinking and instead cling to their assumptions, instincts and habits instead of having an open mind” (Adam Grant, *Think Again*, Viking, 2021, 5). This has led to “calcified ideologies [which] are tearing American culture apart” (Grant, 10).

How accurate is that assessment of our current culture in 2021? I believe the deep divisions in America today in the political, religious, and interpersonal world of tribes and ideologies prove his point. And they give us pause, as a Christian community locally and globally to rethink how we might be boxing in God because of our own calcified thinking. Yes, it’s a matter of faith, but it’s also a matter of an open heart toward God. Remember when Jesus went back to his hometown in Nazareth and read the scripture through His interpretative lens? The people rejected him, saying:

“Where did this man get such great wisdom and miraculous powers? 55Isn’t he just the wood-worker’s son?[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mt.+13%3A54-58&version=TPT" \l "fen-TPT-5068a" \o "See footnote a)] Isn’t his mother named Mary, and his four brothers Jacob,[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mt.+13%3A54-58&version=TPT#fen-TPT-5068b)] Joseph, Simon, and Judah? 56And don’t his sisters all live here in Nazareth? How did he get all this revelation and power?”[[c](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mt.+13%3A54-58&version=TPT#fen-TPT-5069c)] 57And the people became offended and began to turn against him.[[d](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mt.+13%3A54-58&version=TPT" \l "fen-TPT-5070d" \o "See footnote d)] Jesus said, “There’s only one place a prophet isn’t honored—his own hometown!” 58And their great unbelief kept him from doing any mighty miracles *in Nazareth”* (Passion)

These consequences of unbelief are repeated in Matthew’s gospel, even in the presence of mighty miracles in Jesus ministry whenever those miracles violated a sacred understanding of the religious rulers. For example:

* Jesus healed on the Sabbath but instead of celebrating the deliverance from disability and shame for the man with a shriveled hand, the Pharisees condemned Jesus for healing on the Sabbath. Their principles blinded them to the heart of God behind the healing (Mt. 12:9-14).
* When Matthew, the tax-collector, became Jesus’ disciple and invited his colleagues to his home for a meal with Jesus, the Pharisees condemned Jesus for eating with sinners. Jesus’ response was “It is not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick. But go and learn what it means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous but sinners” (Mt. 9:10-13).
* When Jesus healed a demon-possessed man, the Pharisees interpreted that evidence of God’s power over all evil as the work of Satan – “He casts out demons by the Prince of demons” (Mt. 9:34).

In Christian circles today it is commonplace to condemn the Pharisees, but their virulent rejection of Jesus should give us pause. There are positions we hold, ideologies that define our identity, and practices we insist that others perform which also keep us from celebrating God’s powerful hand through members of His Body who may differ from us in culture, race, socioeconomic status, religious and political affiliation. Entrenched thinking and loyalties can harden our hearts so, like the Pharisees, we don’t truly love and honor others as God intends. And we dangerously dismiss God’s restorative work among us. It takes an open mind and a humble, teachable spirit to recognize God’s hand and work redemptively across many barriers to advance God’s kingdom with others.

**Our calling**

So, beloved, I want to call us back to our first love and eternal perspective, to be learners at the feet of Jesus Christ and open to all the ways He wants to bring life through us to our broken world. His call through us is still valid. Here is how Peterson paraphrased it in *The Message:*

28-30“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly” Mt. 11:28-30.

When Jesus is our life and our Lord, we will learn “the unforced rhythms of grace” and be able to recognize His mighty works and participate in them by the power of God. And we will be kept, mercifully, from the hardening of our minds and hearts that pit us against one another. Let’s demonstrate a living alternative to the calcification that is tearing American culture (and the world) apart. Let’s lift Jesus high and keep drawing people to Him. He came as God’s true, anointed Messiah for Israel and the Savior and Lord of all people in the world. What a privilege it is to know Him and be ambassadors for Him in our words and our deeds. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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