

Evolving  
November 5, 2017  
Matthew 23:1-12

*Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, <sup>2</sup> “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; <sup>3</sup> therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. <sup>4</sup> They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear,<sup>[a]</sup> and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. <sup>5</sup> They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. <sup>6</sup> They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, <sup>7</sup> and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. <sup>8</sup> But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students.<sup>[b]</sup> <sup>9</sup> And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. <sup>10</sup> Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah.<sup>[c]</sup> <sup>11</sup> The greatest among you will be your servant. <sup>12</sup> All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.*

Jesus is just getting warmed in these first twelve versions. He is about to unleash a whole lot of woes on those scribes and Pharisees.

- “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them.
- Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.
- “Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘Whoever swears by the sanctuary is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gold of the sanctuary is bound by the oath.’
- “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!
- “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.
- “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth.
- Woe indeed!

Jesus is doing martial arts with words as he takes on the scribes and Pharisees.<sup>1</sup> He is using rhetorical skills to expose the hypocrisy of the religious leaders of his day. Jesus is nailing his seven woes to the door and calling for reform. The religious leaders have lost their way. Some have taken money and been appointed by the Roman government. Some have been seduced by power and wealth. Some have gotten so legalistic they have become cruel and merciless. “Woe to you” is just another way of saying, “This aint right.”

On Tuesday, as many of you awaited little super-heroes and story-book characters to take some of the enormous bag of candy you bought at Costco...the church celebrated the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. Five hundred years ago, on October 31<sup>st</sup>, Martin Luther nailed 95 theses

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<sup>1</sup> Simmonds, Andrew R. Source: Bibliotheca sacra, 166 no 663 Jul - Sep 2009, p 336-349 <http://web.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=3&sid=3c052dac-cc70-4f59-ab9e-b206df94c485%40sessionmgr101>

to the door of All Saints Church in Wittenberg, Germany, to begin a formal academic debate about what he saw as abuses of the church and clergy. The 95 theses were Luther's way of saying, "Woe to you!"

- Woe to you for making forgiveness something to be bought and sold
- Woe to you for being greedy and profiteering
- Woe to you for neglecting your responsibility to the least of these
- Woe to you for amassing an empire complete with a standing army
- Woe to you for casting people out rather than creating pathways in
- Woe to you for holding scripture hostage
- On and on...

Instead of conversation, Luther got excommunicated.

At the same time, much as in Jesus' day, the world was changing. Gutenberg invented the printing press and the push began to print the Bible in languages common people could read, which freed scripture from church and made it accessible to all. Stir in the enlightenment and you have the perfect storm for a major church upheaval. Battles ensued, and lives were lost.

Phyllis Tickle has written and lectured extensively on her observation that the church goes through a major upheaval about every 500 years – and here we are – celebrating the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the last time everything broken apart and open.

Our world is changing dramatically and quickly. The internet, globalization, scientific discovery, technological innovation, climate change are impacting life as we know it and church as we know it.

In addition, the church has its share of issues.

I wonder what "Woe to you" Jesus might stick on the door of the church today?

I could hazard a guess:

- Woe to you for focusing on the afterlife rather than this life
- Woe to you for failing to protect and care for the least of these
- Woe to you for false gospels that promote prosperity and worldly wealth
- Woe to you for condemning and excluding God's beloved
- Woe to you for failing to be the voice the cries out for justice
- Woe to you for going to church rather than being the church

What would you add to the list.....

If you read the statistics mainline denominations are in trouble and it's just a matter of time for all Christian churches.

One thing I hear all the time is, "We need to get more young people in the church!" When I ask, "why," people look at me like I've lost my mind. We need young people to keep this place going – to pay the bills – to serve on committees – to be the next generation. I get it. It is painful to see

something that gave you so much decline. But it can't be about what the church needs. We have to start asking, what does the church have to offer that young people need? What do WE have to offer that humanity needs?

I believe the church has an important role to play in culture. We can be the moral voice of justice. We can create community where individually and collectively people can experience the unconditional love of God. We can, in the safety of a loving community, practice our faith which means growing it and pushing ourselves beyond our comfort zones. We can be a place where lives are transformed into the image and likeness of Jesus – and we can take that presence and love every place we go.

But – we need to do it in a way that speaks today. It's time to begin a conversation. What do we need to leave behind? What do we need to carry forward. What traditions are life-giving? What traditions have out-lived their meaning.

My husband put me on to a great quote this week by a man named Jaroslave Pelikan. "Tradition," he asserts, "is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living."

Traditions are important. Rituals are important. Doing things the same way over and over again without knowing why - that is not so important.

We need to begin a conversation. We need to be willing to look at everything we do as church and give the next generation a living faith!

What "woes" would Jesus stick to our door here at FCCO? What are we doing right?

If you decide you want to answer those questions, all I can say is please use tape on my door.

### **A Story for Communion**

A young girl was watching her mother bake a ham for a family gathering and noticed her mom cutting off the ends before placing it in the oven.

"Mom, why do you cut the ends off before baking the ham?" she asked.

"Hmmm...I think it helps soak up the juices while it's baking. I'm actually not sure, though. That's just the way your grandma always did it, so I've just always cut them off. Why don't you call grandma and ask her?"

So, the little girl phoned her grandma and asked "Grandma, mom is making a ham and cut off the ends before placing it in the oven. She said that it's probably to help soak up the juices but wasn't sure. She said you'd know because she learned how to cook from you."

"That's true. I do cut off the ends of the ham before baking. But I'm actually not sure why either. I learned how to cook from my mom. You should ask her."

So, the inquisitive little girl called her great grandmother and asked "Great grandma, mom and grandma said they learned how to cook a ham from watching you. Do you cut off the ends of the ham to help it soak up the juices?"

The great grandmother chuckled. "Oh, no sweetie. I just never had a pan big enough to hold a whole ham, so I always had to cut off the ends to make it fit."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <http://critical-thinkers.com/2015/01/cutting-off-the-ends-of-the-ham/>