

“Close Encounters on the Way to the Cross: Caiaphas & the Pharisees”

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Text: John 11:45 - 57

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Of Jesus' close encounters on the way to the cross, perhaps Jesus' encounters with the Pharisees was the most tragic...in a few ways. Jesus' relationship with them in the beginning was not bad! In Luke 5:17 we read that early on Pharisees were coming "from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem" to hear him. When Jesus healed the paralytic they were amazed and they glorified God. Pharisees invited Jesus to their homes for meals, the highest form of acceptance one Jew could offer another. Many respected him, they wanted to hear his teaching, some even began to be followers. The debates Jesus had with the Pharisees were the very same kind of debates Pharisees had among themselves as they worked together to better understand God, their faith and the Torah. You may be surprised to know that many of the things Jesus taught was the theology held the Pharisees. They believed in a bodily resurrection at the end of life. They believed that this current age would come to an end and God would renew all in a new age. They believed in conversion, the priesthood of all believers. They practised a form of baptism. They believed in a final judgment by a gracious God. And they awaited the coming of God's

Messiah. Because of these things Jesus intrigued them a lot at the beginning of his public ministry.

But over time, good first impressions gave way to deep concerns. Jesus would teach “You have heard it said (he then recited a law), but I tell you...”. Some laws he interpreted far more strictly than the Pharisees did. Other laws, like the purity law to wash hands before meals, Jesus didn’t follow at all. But more than that Jesus was doing these things and proclaiming these things based on his own personal authority that was given him by “my Father” (God). To the Pharisees that was a very disruptive idea. Pharisees interpreted the Law together. In their view, Jesus was a rogue independent, and in their minds he was not always getting it right! As Jesus’ ministry went on, the Pharisees became more opposed to him because of this. They were pretty sure they had it worked out right, which meant Jesus must be wrong. Because of this they came to have closed minds about Jesus. Perhaps this was part of the reason Jesus became so critical of them. They were, after all, the religious authorities. Jesus taught “to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded” (Luke 12.48). Jesus had high expectations of the Pharisees. So as their minds became more closed to his teachings over time, we see Jesus grow exasperated in response, to the point where he would call them “you brood of vipers”.

So as the minds of the Pharisees were closing towards Jesus, what frightened them was the growing number of Jews who seemed to have open minds about Jesus.

Consequently, the Sanhedrin (a governing body in Jerusalem composed of Pharisees) called a meeting. “What are we to do? This man performs many signs. If people follow him the Romans will come and destroy us”. The Pharisees were not only worried about the threat Jesus posed to their understanding of faithfulness before God, but that Jesus might also cause enough social upheaval that the Roman army could take military action to put it down. Caiaphas proposed the solution: “It is better that one man die for the people than to have a whole nation destroyed”. Caiaphas was proposing a simple, utilitarian solution to both problems in order to maintain the status quo. But they had a problem: they had no authority to kill Jesus. Besides, they might make the situation they saw even worse if the people thought the Pharisees were the executioners. So, from that day they began to plot Jesus’ death.

As we follow the story towards Good Friday, we clearly see that the Pharisees had an instrumental role that ended with Jesus on the cross. True...but I find I can’t judge them as totally wicked for it. I say this because of how easy it is for anyone to have a closed mind.

What we call a “closed mind” is actually a fixed attitude. An attitude is an evaluation that we have about something (“good, bad...right, wrong...”). An attitude is an evaluation that we hold as a habit. Attitudes are invaluable for us because they speed up our thinking process: they are pre-evaluations and pre-decisions that we can quickly apply in emerging situations. We all rely on them daily—they are

good things! But, like any good thing, they can have their unhelpful consequences as well. Attitudes can pre-position us to take a side, even before we've really begun to think about the issue at hand. In other words, attitudes can bias our thinking processes. So it would have been for the Pharisees when they began to realize how different Jesus' teachings really were. When they realized the differences, their attitudes began to kick in. So they began to criticize Jesus for things like healing someone on the Sabbath, because to them healing was a work and not allowed on the Sabbath (even though what they witnessed was the power of the very God they desired to honour). Soon after experiences like this the Pharisees began to debate Jesus about what was right and wrong. The act of debating tends to cause us to defend our attitudes (rather than really engage over an issue), which means we may not actually hear, reflect on, and appreciate what the other person is saying or doing. Finally, the act of defending attitudes tends to make attitudes more rigid. As you observe how the Pharisees attitudes about Jesus shifted from the time they first encountered him until that meeting we read about today, we can clearly see that their thinking followed the same trajectory I've just described. They went from being curious and open and amazed (experiences that could potentially change their attitudes) to (in the end) doubling down on attitudes that had become rigid. They had closed minds towards Jesus. How closed? Remember how Nicodemus at a previous meeting of the Sanhedrin reminded the others that "our law will not let us judge a person without first giving them a hearing." Their attitudes were so fixed against Jesus that they did not hear the truth

of Nicodemus' reminder to them. Instead, they asked Nicodemus, "So, are you with Jesus or are you with us?" When attitudes become fixed the results can be tragic, as they would be for Jesus some days later.

Back in my London congregation I once preached a sermon on forgiveness and reconciliation. After, a member came to tell me her story. Years earlier her daughter began to date a young man and mom did not like the guy. Her attitude was "he is wrong for my daughter." And she told her daughter so. That led to fights and a rift in their relationship. The mother stopped talking with the daughter. Eventually when her daughter married this gentleman, the mom went to the wedding service but did not attend the reception. Then she told me that the couple had a baby and she had never seen her first granddaughter, who was now one year old. Defending her fixed attitude in her battle with her daughter caused her to dig a foxhole so deep that she could not climb out of it. A tragedy. But the story ended well. The mom went to the daughter with great humility, confessed her fault, asked forgiveness and has become fully reconciled. Thank God Jesus calls us to this kind of practice because it can help us undo what a closed mind can cause. Remember Jesus' words on the cross concerning those who put him up there, out of their own closed minds? "Forgive them Father, for they know not what they do."

Closed minds / fixed attitudes can affect relationships within the church as well. A good example is our denomination's current debate over same sex

relationships. On each side of the debate we find people with fixed attitudes, oriented in a way that has made “the other” an enemy. The consequences of this could be tragic for The Presbyterian Church in Canada. But I am heartened by the attitude the General Assembly has had at its past two meetings...an attitude that asks the question “Is there a way forward for us that means we can continue together based on all that we share in common instead of becoming divided on this one point?” I for one hope we can reach a consensus on the answer to this question, but to achieve that everyone needs to have an open mind towards the other. I truly hope that we can do this in our own house because I think the future of the church in Canada depends on this kind of attitude. In the coming decades I believe the work and the witness of the church will depend on stronger ecumenical relationships...in which Presbyterian and Pentecostal and Catholic and Orthodox can celebrate and work more and more collegially based on what we share in common rather than live in isolation because of our differences. And if we can't do that within our own house then the tragedy may likely be that we won't be able to do it with other denominations. An open mind is needed.

It can even impact our own lived faith. Imagine a Christian who believes firmly that God does not answer prayer or makes any interventions in the life of the world. That would be a fixed attitude. But what could be its tragic consequence? Such a person may never experience the peace that can come from simply lifting one's concerns and worries to God in prayer. Such a person may never

have the eyes to see something as an experience of God's intervention in their life, and know the subsequent growing confidence in faith. Such a person may find that their faith gives them little hope.

The story of the Pharisees is a cautionary tale about what can happen when one has a closed mind. It can lead to failure in understanding the other...as it did for the Pharisees who in time failed to understand what Jesus was talking about. Jesus told them, "I come not to abolish the Law but to fulfil it" (Matt. 5:17). For Jesus that meant fulfil it in a reoriented way. But the Pharisees couldn't see that, because what Jesus said and did was filtered through their current attitudes. So on our Lenten journey towards the cross, this story can prompt a question in us for reflection. What attitudes do I have that restrain me from following after Jesus more closely?

Throughout this sermon I have said a few times that having a closed mind can have tragic consequences. It did for the Pharisees. Jesus was arrested by those sent by the religious authorities. Caiaphas, the high priest, sent Jesus to Pilate's headquarters. When Pilate asked "Why have you brought this man before me?" they answered, "He is a criminal!"...which was not really true. After interrogating Jesus Pilate told the Jews "I find no case against him" but still the Jews called for Jesus' death. On the third time he told the crowd that he could find no case against him the crowds called back "He claims to be a king and we have no king but Caesar!" For the Pharisees in the crowd (as there undoubtedly was) this was a most egregious lie, for

in their faith they knew God was their only King and they wanted nothing more than to see their land rid of the Romans. The tragedy of a closed mind is that a great heresy as this could be spoken, not to defend a truth, but defend a fixed attitude. I wonder if any Pharisees would later regret that they would go so far as diminish God.