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## *Phylacteries Broad and Fringes Long*

A Sermon by the Very Reverend Sam G. Candler  
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip  
Atlanta, Georgia

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*Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father" the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted. -Matthew 23:1-12*

So, what are you wearing to the Halloween costume party?

If nothing else comes from your attendance at church today, perhaps you have at least been offered a suggestion of what to wear at this year's Halloween party. Well, of course! Wear your phylacteries broad and your fringes long!

What in the world is Jesus speaking of when he mentions "phylacteries" here in the Gospel of Matthew? Let your mind wander no longer. Phylacteries, in the first century CE, were small, square, black leather boxes, containing passages of scripture which some strictly observant Jews still wear on the forehead, and on the left arm. This tradition arose because of what those biblical verses actually said, especially at Deuteronomy 6:6-8, "Keep these words that I am commanding you in your heart, bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem, or frontlet, on your forehead or between your eyes."

So developed the sincere custom of literally wearing the bible verses on one's forehead. There is nothing wrong with that. Maybe there is nothing wrong with Tim Tebow, when he was the quarterback of the University of Florida football team actually printing and wearing the Bible verse, Philippians 4:13, on his face during the games.

There shouldn't be anything inherently wrong with wearing our faith on our foreheads, or about our wearing particular insignias of our office, either. Here am I, a priest in the Episcopal Church, often wearing broad and long fringes! Maybe one of the attendant advantages of being a priest in today's culture, is that I usually have something easy to wear to Halloween costume party.

In today's gospel, it is obvious that Jesus considered the wearing of broad phylacteries and long fringes and lofty titles, to be

hypocritical for some people. "These religious authorities," he said, "they sit in important places of tradition and history. They even teach the right things. Do what they say, but do not do as they do."

Who among us has not said that sort of thing before? We've been saying those things about our authority figures for some time, now! We began with our parents. Our fathers, for instance, just as Jesus indicated in this passage. Then we said the same things about our teachers. Certainly about our elected officials, and about our church authorities today. "You look so fancy all dressed up like that! You seem so comfortable with your title""father, teacher, instructor""but you don't even carry the same burdens you place on us!"

The more we grow up in this world, the more hypocrisy we become aware of. And so it is, that we are tempted, we truly consider, trying not to become part of that authoritative culture around us. We'd rather not wear the cloaks of corporate authority; the business suit, for instance. The religious vestments, maybe. The mantles of manna and finance. Or even the academic gowns and hoods of our professors. Maybe we don't even want to live in the same sort of family, or community, that seemed so hypocritical to us. So we swear to forego the uniform. We would rather work outside the system that has failed us.

This seems to be the very understandable sentiment of our recent Occupy Movements""Occupy Wall Street, and Occupy London Stock Exchange""willing even to congregate outside the boundaries of law and order. They don't want the uniform! Many of us really do support their sentiment, against economic inequality and financial injustice, even if their coherency has yet to be formed.

I remember seeing the old rock musician Frank Zappa in concert one day, sometime in the 60s or 70s. He was as iconoclastic as they come. He enjoyed deconstructing any structure he could find. During the concert, he gazed out at everyone in blue jeans and tie-dyed tee shirts, all being cool and countercultural and rebellious. So he said, "Don't kid yourselves! You're all in uniform."

Yes, inevitably, we all wear some sort of uniform, some sort of costume, even when we are trying our hardest not to wear a uniform. Inevitably, most of us take on some sort of title, some sort of name, some sort of role.

Part of our education in life, part of our growing up, is discovering which uniform, which costume, we want to wear willingly. And it takes time. That uniform will reveal what structure we choose to live in. Ludwig Wittgenstein might have called these structures "forms of life." They will be important, because the structure we choose""the form of life we choose""will also be the platform from which we might serve the world.

Some members of the Occupy movements, in their raw and sometimes unformed energy, have yet to choose a structure. That can be a problem. Down in Atlanta a few weeks ago, they couldn't even decide if they would allow the great civil rights hero, Congressman John Lewis, to speak.

I believe that our God actually does need structures, forms of life, in which and from which God's people serve the world. Surely you have heard the phrase, so popular lately, "I am spiritual, but I'm not religious." We all know what that means. It means that I want to enjoy and appreciate my own, personal, spiritual life""but I do not want to be part of a larger, more corporate structure. "A structure like religion! Religion seems to be too much about broad phylacteries and long fringes, that have nothing to do with what I really face in life."

But what about other people? The moment we become spiritual with "other people" is the moment we become religious. The moment we actually talk about "God" and "the Good" with other people, we have entered a structure of conversation""a religious conversation. And the moment we engage others in a spiritual way, to serve the world, we form a "religious" structure! The word "religion" comes from the same root word as "ligament;" it means to tie together. The moment we tie together, or weave together, our common spiritual threads, we become religious. We design a uniform. We create a structure. We might even form a church.

Yes, Jesus is right. Beware those who flaunt only the uniform or the title, without filling that uniform or that title with something good and holy. Or without realizing that all of us, no matter what our title, have only one true teacher, one true instructor, one true father, who is God. But don't forget, either, that those structures that we are inevitably a part of, those

bodies, are how we serve the world in the name of a good and merciful God.

It is probable that everyone in this room is wearing, or will wear, some insignia of structure and authority. You will have titles and names associated with you, if you don't already. And let me tell you, if you don't already know: the very word, "Harvard," associated with one's name"and, now, my name, too" is quite a powerful phylactery.

Yes, sometimes it is a phylactery. Perhaps some of you have been thinking of another word every time I have been saying the word, "phylactery." Well, the meaning of the word "phylactery" is close to the meaning of the word, "prophylactic." In the time of Jesus, the notion of a phylactery was associated with being a safeguard, a means of protection, even a sort of magical amulet.

The danger of all our costumes, our uniforms, our phylacteries is that we do use them as safeguards, even as hiding places, to protect us from truly engaging the world. To hide from truly encountering, and serving the world.

You know, in one of my youthful church bible studies, we used to play a little game. We would read the story, the passage, and then ask: Which character in the story do you relate to? Who do you identify with?

Usually, we relate to one of the onlookers, or the person in need. It's usually hard to identify with Jesus. But today's passage is different. Because it might be easier to identify with Jesus in today's story, criticizing the instructors and the fathers among us. It's more embarrassing to be the scribes and Pharisees.

What if we are the scribes and Pharisees? What do we do with these words and warnings of Jesus when we are the ones tempted to hide behind our structures, our titles, our privileges, our phylacteries?

Jesus' answer is simple: learn to be humble again.

With Jesus, the only authority by which we serve the world, the only authority which can spiritually govern our behavior is the authority of humility. The way of Jesus is the way of humility.

Humility comes from the word, "humus," which means dirt. It means good dirt. It means someone who is down to earth. Real. Down South, where I grew up, we had a saying for those who flaunted their high-sounding spiritual notions, and titles and uniforms. We'd say that person "is so heavenly minded that he is no earthly good."

Jesus would have us be down to earth, humble, and authentic" in our choice of uniform and in our choice of how we will serve the world. We all wear some sort of uniform. We join some structure in which we will serve the world. We all wear some sort of phylactery and fringe.

But today we are reminded not to let our phylacteries get so broad, or our fringes so long, or our titles so haughty, that they overwhelm our true selves, our down-to-earth selves, our humble selves. We are here on this earth to serve, in the name of the one God, without letting our phylacteries and fringes get in the way.

Jesus said, "The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted."

AMEN.

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