
Of Phylacteries and Fringes

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**A sermon by the Rev. Canon George M. Maxwell, Jr.
Atlanta, Georgia
Proper 26 - Year A**

In a recent issue of the *New Yorker*, Maria Semple tells a fictional, yet all too believable, story of trying to organize a preschool event. The story unfolds in a string of emails.

Hi, everyone!

The Mountain Room is gearing up for its Day of the Dead celebration on Friday. Please send in photos of loved ones for our altar. All parents are welcome to come by on Wednesday afternoon to help us make candles and decorate skulls.

Thanks!

Emily

Hi again.

Because I've gotten some questions about my last email, there is nothing "wrong" with Halloween. The Day of the Dead is the Mexican version, a time of remembrance. Many of you chose Little Learners because of our emphasis on global awareness. Our celebration on Friday is an example of that. The skulls we're decorating are sugar skulls. I should have made that more clear.

Emily

Parents:

Some of you have expressed concern about your children celebrating a holiday with the word "dead" in it. I asked Eleanor's mom, who's a pediatrician, and here's what she said: "Preschoolers tend to see death as temporary and reversible. Therefore, I see nothing traumatic about the Day of the Dead." I hope this helps.

Emily

Dear Parents:

In response to the email we all received from Maddie's parents, in which they shared their decision to raise their daughter dogma-free, yes, there will be an altar, but please be assured that the Day of the Dead is a pagan celebration of life and has nothing to do with God. Keep those photos coming!

Emily

Hello.

Perhaps "pagan" was a poor word choice. I feel like we're veering a bit off track, so here's what I'll do. I'll start setting up our altar now, so that today at pickup you can see for yourselves how colorful and harmless the Day of the Dead truly is.

Emily

Parents:

The photos should be of loved ones who have passed. Max's grandma was understandably shaken when she came in and saw a photo of herself on the altar. But the candles and skulls were cute, right?

Emily

Mountain Room Parents:

It's late and I can't possibly respond to each and every email. (Not that it comes up a lot in conversation, but I

have children, too.) As the skulls have clearly become a distraction, I decided to throw them away. , Finally, to those parents who are offended by our Day of the Dead celebration, I'd like to point out that there are parents who are offended that you are offended.
Emily

Dear Parents:

Thanks to their group email, we now know that the families of Millie and Jaden M. recognize Jesus Christ as their Saviour. There still seems to be some confusion about why, if we want to celebrate life, we're actually celebrating death. To better explain this "bewildering detour," I've asked Adela, who works in the office and makes waffles for us on Wednesdays, and who was born in Mexico, to write to you directly.
Emily

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Parents:

I sincerely apologize for Adela's email. I would have looked it over, but I was at my daughter's piano recital. , For now, let's agree that email has reached its limits. How about we process our feelings face-to-face? 9 a.m. tomorrow?

Dear Parents:

Some of you chose to engage in our dialogue. Some chose to form a human chain. Others had jobs (!) to go to. So we're all up to speed, let me recap this morning's discussion:

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- We're moving past the word "altar" and calling it what it really is: a Seahawks blanket draped over some cinder blocks.
- Adela will not be preparing food anymore and Waffle Wednesdays will be suspended. (That didn't make us any new friends in the Rainbow and Sunshine Rooms!)
- On Friday morning, I will divide the Mountain Room into three groups: those who wish to celebrate the Day of the Dead; those who wish to celebrate Halloween; and Maddie, who will make nondenominational potato prints in the corner.

Dear Mountain Room Parents:

Today I learned not to have open flames in the same room as a costume parade. I learned that a five-dollar belly-dancer outfit purchased at a pop-up costume store can easily catch fire, , I learned that a child's emerging completely unscathed from a burning costume isn't a good enough outcome for some parents. I learned that I will be unemployed on Monday. For me, the Day of the Dead will always be a time of remembrance.
Happy Halloween!
Emily

This story is funny because it's so real. Emily doesn't stand a chance. The parents are carrying around so much anxiety that they see shadows behind every tree. Everything seems dangerous. Their reactions are so intense that even a preschool celebration of life turns quickly into a near-death experience.

And, they are quick to engage. They can't wait to pick a fight. You get the sense that their favorite word is "you." Blaming someone else is their way of passing on their anxiety. It calms them down. The fight is just a way to make them feel better.

Yet, this way of being - anxiously focusing on the fault of others - is ultimately self-destructive.

Jesus offers to save us from ourselves, I think, when he attacks the scribes and the Pharisees for their hypocrisy.

He has a long list of complaints. They put burdens on the shoulders of others, but refuse to share the load. They take the best seats at the synagogues and at the banquet tables. They want to be called "rabbi" when they are greeted in the marketplaces.

The one that is the most telling, though, is Jesus' complaint that they "make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long."

A phylactery is a small, black leather box. It is designed to hold scrolls of parchment inscribed with selected verses from the Torah. One of the verses is a passage that Jesus describes as the greatest commandment of the law (Mt 22:37) - "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might." (Deut 6:4) Devout Jews wear the boxes during prayer.

The reference to fringes refers to the edges of a traditional Jewish prayer shawl.

Jesus, you see, is not talking just about hypocrisy.

He is not offering such a harsh judgment on the scribes and the Pharisees just because they are saying one thing and doing another. If you think about it, they are getting a lot of things right. They are saying the right things, advocating for the right laws, and praying with the right scriptures. Jesus goes so far as to tell both the crowd and his disciples to practice what the scribes and the Pharisees teach.

Jesus is talking about their relationship to God.

Jesus is not condemning the scribes and the Pharisees because of their hypocrisy. He is condemning them because of the effect that their hypocrisy is having on others. They are the leaders. They are the models. They are the people others imitate. As a result, they can't lead others into the kingdom, if they don't live as if they have entered the kingdom. They can't lead others into the new life that the Messiah offers, if they can't recognize Jesus as the Messiah.

Jesus is talking about their relationship to God, and it starts with prayer and worship.

It is in prayer and worship that we stop everything else and make room for Christ in our lives. It is in prayer and worship that, as one spiritual writer said, we learn to "bear the trial of being displeasing to ourselves, so that we will be for Jesus a pleasant place of shelter." It is in prayer and worship that we begin the frightening task of learning to tell the truth about ourselves, and to tolerate the imperfection that the truth reveals.

Jesus offers to save us from ourselves because we are the anxious Mountain Room parents, and the hypocritical scribes and Pharisees. We are the ones who scapegoat others so that we don't have to face the truth about ourselves. We are the ones who fail to lead others into the kingdom because we fail to live as if we have entered the kingdom ourselves.

Jesus reminds us to look up before we look out.

He seems to be telling us that it is in our relationship with God that we will find the courage to manage our own anxiety so that we don't have to pick fights to pass it on to others. He seems to be telling us that it is in our relationship with God that we will find the humility to practice what we preach.

So, bring on the phylacteries and the fringes. But, remember their purpose. They are there to guide us through the trial of being displeasing to ourselves, so that we may be for Jesus pleasant places of shelter. It is Jesus Christ, the Messiah, who will save us from the lives we think we want to lead, or worse, from leading others down the crooked paths we think we want to walk.

Amen

You might be interested to know -

- As of the date of this sermon, the story of the Mountain Room Parents is available at http://www.newyorker.com/humor/2011/10/24/111024sh_shouts_sample
- My analysis of the email exchange as reflecting the anxiety of the parents draws on Bowen Family Systems Theory. For a short, accessible summary of the theory, see Roberta Gilbert's book, "The Eight Concepts of Bowen Theory" (Falls Church, VA: Leading Systems Press, 2004).
- My analysis of Jesus' attack on the scribes and the Pharisees draws heavily from Stanley Hauerwas. In his book, "Matthew: A Theological Commentary on the Bible" (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), pp. 195 - 200, Hauerwas points out the things that the scribes and the Pharisees got right, Jesus' focus on the effect their hypocrisy has on others, and the vital link between worship and justice.

- The image of bearing the trial of being displeasing to yourself in order to be for Jesus a pleasant place of shelter comes from Saint Theresa of Lysieux - specifically, "Collected Letters of St. Therese of Lisieux," trans. F. J. Sheed (Sheed and Ward, 1949), p. 303. Scott Peck uses this image in his book, "People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil " (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983), p. 11, where he argues that this image defines what it means to be a Christian.