

St. Andrew's Sermons  
The Rev. John D. Rohrs  
20 Pent A; Oct. 30, 2011  
Gospel: Matthew 23:1-12

### **Phylacteries and Fringes**

Meister Eckhart was a fourteenth century Christian mystic, and he once told this story: "I was having lunch in a field one day," he said, "and I troubled an ant with a question. I asked him humbly, 'Have you ever been to Paris?' He replied, 'No, but I wouldn't mind going.' And then he asked me if I'd ever been to a famous ant city. I regretted that I hadn't, but was quick to add, 'I wouldn't mind either!' This led to a conclusion: There is life that we do not know of. What percent is this earth of the infinite realm? What percent of time is one second in eternity? Less than that is our knowledge of God."

It's a clever little story with a very serious message: God is bigger than we think. When it comes to the mystery and majesty of the divine, there are always further depths to explore. It's absurd that anyone could think they have it all figured out, with nothing left to learn. And yet that's exactly what happens in our gospel today. Jesus is talking about the scribes and Pharisees, and he's disgusted by their arrogance. They jockey for places of honor, he says. They love to be called rabbi. Worst of all, their phylacteries are broad and their fringes are long.

A bit of a sidebar here. Phylactery is one of the great words in the Bible. If you don't know what it means, it's a leather case containing verses of Scripture. It was, and still is in some Jewish congregations, worn strapped around the arm and over the forehead during worship. So when Jesus says their phylacteries are broad, he means they were extra large and easy to see. And his point is not that there's anything wrong with that form of piety; he's talking about the intent. These scribes and Pharisees were using phylacteries as symbols of hubris instead of humility. It was just for show, as though to say look at me – I have all the answers.

But nothing could be further from the truth. There is so much we don't know, as Eckhart reminds us. And the faithful response, it seems to me, is to live with a humble sense of curiosity and wonder, an openness to new discoveries about the mystery of God.

In a few moments [At the later service today] we will baptize Lydon Benson, Carson Hogge, and John Pollard. This is a joyful and festive day for

them, for their families, and for this church, but the blunt reality is that they will grow up in an era in which the majority of their peers will not attend church. There are lots of reasons for that but perhaps the biggest is that many people of my generation and younger view the church as nothing but phylacteries and fringes. They look at the church and what they too often see is hypocrisy and arrogance, closed doors and closed minds.

Now I'm proud to say that St. Andrew's is not such a place. I think we have a real sense of curiosity and openness, a desire to learn and grow together in faith. So that's all for the good, but it also presents a challenge. G. K. Chesterton once said that "it's not enough to simply have an open mind. The object of opening your mind, like opening your mouth, is to shut it again on something solid." And that's our challenge – not just ours but the challenge of any church that hopes to remain relevant.

On one hand, we have to maintain that spirit of welcome and curiosity and wonder, and at the same time we have to provide something solid – something real and deep and true. And that something is the good news of the gospel. It's a story that is radically inclusive, mind-opening, and heart-filling. It's a story that brings comfort in this world and hope for the next. It's a story that we can share in word and deed, and that's a pledge that we make today to these three families.

Will we, the people of St. Andrew's, do all in our power to support these children in their journeys of faith? That's the question that comes before us this morning, and the humble answer, without phylacteries or fringes but simply with the promise to continue the journey in our own lives and hearts, is, "We will, with God's help." Amen.