



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by  
The Reverend Peter Thompson, Vicar

## The Pharisees and Public Health

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, August 29, 2021*

*The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost*

*Based on Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9; James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23*

*As a chalice cast with gold,  
Burnished bright and brimmed with wine,  
Make me Lord as fit to hold,  
Grace and truth and love divine.  
Let my praise and worship start  
With the cleansing of my heart. Amen.<sup>1</sup>*

The Pharisees and the scribes are convenient villains, but, from the perspective of 2021, they don't seem all that unreasonable. Handwashing, after all, is still considered to be a common-sense public health practice, like getting vaccinated or wearing masks. Jesus' interlocutors might have been more concerned about spiritual wellbeing than health of a physical kind; I suspect, however, that their aims were not too different from those held by the public health officials of our day. The Pharisees and the scribes wanted the general populace to prioritize their wellbeing and the wellbeing of their communities, to take sensible precautions against real threats, and to heed the carefully considered guidance of respected authorities.

We do a disservice to the Pharisees and the scribes and to ourselves if we assume that the concerns they expressed were self-evidently ridiculous—that their only interest in challenging Jesus and his disciples about handwashing was to harass a harmless rabbi about trivial superficialities in order to derive some kind of perverse satisfaction from their own superiority. Such an interpretation of the Pharisees and the scribes' behavior is rooted in an anti-Judaism that dates back almost to the time of Jesus and haunts the Church to this day.

To the contrary, the Pharisees and the scribes had good intentions. By all indications, they were educated, well-informed, responsible leaders who cared about correcting lapses, avoiding shortcuts, and doing things the right way. Their concerns about handwashing—or lack of handwashing—made sense. The Pharisees and the scribes believed that you could compromise your purity—and thus your relationship with God—by not washing your hands in the proper ways and at the proper times. Surely you would want someone to let you know if you were putting your own wellbeing in such jeopardy.

Jesus' response to the Pharisees and the scribes reveals some sympathy with their thinking. Jesus is not uninterested in purity; he expresses quite a bit of concern about defilement and evil. The problem for Jesus is that the Pharisees and the scribes misdirect their attention and efforts. The Pharisees and the scribes project their anxieties about uncleanness onto Jesus' disciples instead of turning their gaze inward and examining themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas H. Troeger, "As A Chalice Cast With Gold," <https://books.google.com/books?id=dJq7BwAAQBAJ&pg=PA501&lpq=PA501>.

This morning's Gospel reading, then, is not an invective against pedantic nitpicking. At least in Jesus' mind, the Pharisees and the scribes were justified in caring about issues of impurity. There was nothing extreme or small-minded about their approach. But, in their attempts to address the impurity of others, the Pharisees and the scribes overlooked their personal limitations and faults. Pointing this out, Jesus disabused the Pharisees and the scribes of any notion they may have had that their own behavior was exemplary. His censure of the Pharisees and the scribes should give us pause the next time we are tempted to set ourselves above others and appoint ourselves as the moral police. His words to the Pharisees and the scribes serve as a warning: every time we dare to critique the behavior of our fellow human beings, we run the risk of hypocrisy, of saying one thing while doing another.

Right around New Year's Day of this year, as 2020 became 2021, several of my friends became obsessed with an Instagram account that sought to expose hypocrites. The main targets of the account were social media celebrities, so-called influencers, who, in the first weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic, had implored their followers to stay home and stop the spread, but now, after nine and half months of wearying restrictions and at the height of a terrifying second wave, were headed to Mexico to party. Some of the targeted influencers were even medical professionals who had previously used their status as such to win sympathy and acclaim from their online followers. My friends watched with glee as these popular personalities, who were essentially inviting criticism by traveling internationally and gathering maskless in large numbers, were very publicly shamed.

As my friends liked and shared these virtual humiliations, I began to feel smug. My friends were portraying themselves as people who disapproved of reckless behavior, but I knew that they, too, were not perfect. One friend had just returned from an international trip of their own. Another friend had been on a plane over ten times since the beginning of the pandemic. One friend recently ate at a restaurant indoors, while another friend invited maskless guests to a meal at their apartment. Not only had my approach to COVID been more careful than my friends', I was also remaining morally pure by refusing to take delight in the embarrassment of others.

And then I was forced to confront my own penchant for hypocrisy. After a few months' break at the beginning of the pandemic, I had been taking the subway since last fall. At first, compliance with mask mandates seemed pretty good. Occasionally, I'd see someone not wearing a mask or wearing a mask incorrectly, and I'd shuffle to the other end of the train car and hope for the best. I assumed these individuals were ignorant outliers who didn't merit my attention. When people started getting vaccinated, however, compliance began to decrease. Eventually, I, too, was fully vaccinated. With loosening restrictions, I started eating indoors at restaurants and gathering more often with friends. I went to the grocery store maskless. I resumed attending a weekly exercise class where I would breathe heavily with forty other people in a remarkably small indoor space. For three short weeks, our Sunday services here at St. Bart's, drawing nearly a hundred fifty people, didn't require masks. In those days before our full awareness of the Delta variant, I trusted CDC guidance and felt almost completely safe in all of these contexts. But when I got on the subway, I would become incensed at the brazen defiance of the maskless and incorrectly masked. How dare these mischievous miscreants brazenly defy the rules that have been put in place to keep all of us safe? Who do they think they are? Remember, whether I should have been or not, I wasn't concerned about my own health or even really the health of those around me. I thought most of us were vaccinated and thus would be perfectly fine. I was comfortable going maskless in all sorts of other settings without much of a second thought. But I still couldn't fathom why these criminals in the subway wouldn't put on a mask. I wanted them prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. I imagined cursing at them, lecturing them on public health, contacting the police. My rage reached nearly murderous heights. I even fantasized about taking pictures of the offenders and posting those pictures on Instagram. It turns out I was not nearly as pure as I had assumed.

And so I asked myself: why am I so interested in imposing punishment on my subway friends? I didn't think I was going to get sick from these maskless travelers. I doubted that they were serious threats to

others. I came to realize that I had taken my need to feel superior and my voracious desire to judge and dressed them up as a public health concern.

Of course, with the resurgence of COVID-19, including among the fully vaccinated, the lack of compliance with mask mandates on the subway and elsewhere is once again a very real problem. I can again feel justified in my anger as I scan the subway car to find an increasing number of maskless faces. But this summer I learned anew that even valid, seemingly well-meaning kinds of grievances can easily become infected with toxic self-righteousness. From this point forward, every time I look askance at someone being irresponsible about COVID, I'll wonder: do I really care because I'm worried about people's health or do I just want to think of myself as better than everyone else?

Now, hold on a second, you say. We're in a global pandemic. Millions of people have died. It is hardly a time for theoretical musings about hypocrisy and self-righteousness. If people are putting others in danger, shame them as much as you like. Punish them, scream at them, turn them in. This is survival we're talking about. Better to be harsh than to be dead. We can't afford to let anything slide.

And my response is: fair point. The stakes are high. The stakes were high for the Pharisees and the scribes, too. They believed impurity was like a virus that should not be allowed to spread. And yet Jesus refused to entertain their strident critique of his disciples' behavior. For the last year and a half, experts have told us that, when it comes to convincing people to make wise public health choices, shame doesn't work. While governments, employers and other institutions may be able to influence decisions by providing incentives, instituting requirements, or taking away privileges, berating the maskless and ridiculing the unvaccinated will likely be ineffective on an individual basis. "Trying to shame people into healthier behavior [not only] doesn't work," Harvard public health professor Julia Marcus asserts, "[it] actually can make things worse."<sup>2</sup> "When you come out [of] the gate telling people they are incorrect about something they believe," Harvard Business School professor Laura Huang explains, "this can come off as insulting and condescending, which often results in the other person losing interest in engaging with you productively."<sup>3</sup> Entrenchment becomes possible. "The first thing I would [recommend]," UCLA public health professor Chandra Ford adds, "is to listen first...we have to meet people where they are, so we actually have to hear where they are first."<sup>4</sup> Scolding won't get you far. Patience, respect, empathy, and a touch of humility together will go a long way. "The longer we spend furious at the bad actors among us," Sarah Smarsh wrote in a recent New York Times op-ed, "the further we move from the truth: that many unvaccinated people are scared just like us, and that with the right help and information, they would sit down next to nurses and pull up their sleeves."<sup>5</sup>

I know this has been a long slog already. Those of us who have done our best to keep ourselves and others safe are rightly upset with those who seem to take the collective health of our society for granted. But it is precisely when situations are at their most critical that the way we treat one another matters most. Unforgiving scrutiny and cruel condemnation will not end this pandemic. Boundless compassion will. Let's put our energy where it belongs.

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Julia Marcus, "The Dudes Who Won't Wear Masks," <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/dudes-who-wont-wear-masks/613375/>.

<sup>3</sup> Jessica Roy, "How to Convince Someone to Get Vaccinated," <https://www.latimes.com/science/story/2021-05-17/tips-how-to-convince-someone-to-get-vaccinated>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Sarah Smarsh, "What to Do With Our Covid Rage," <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/07/opinion/sunday/covid-unvaccinated-anger.html>