

# Story and Meditation: Not Like Them

November 1, 2020

Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost

Holy Communion

Matthew 23:1-12

by *Eric Anderson*

She was getting bored. Cracking the eggshell had been an exciting experience, even if she didn't remember it well and hadn't been able to see much. Seeing the world for the first time as her vision cleared over the next couple of days had been, well, eye-opening. The sky was so blue, then so dark, the sun so bright, the ocean waves tossed below, well.

It was something.

She had come to know her parents. One or the other of them had been with her pretty continuously those first two weeks, and she'd heard them tell stories about their lives, and the lives of their parents, and the funny things that koa'e kea see and hear and do. Later, though, they seemed to spend more time out at sea, bringing her meals but telling fewer stories. She supposed that meant she was growing up.

Nothing new had happened in a while, though – remember, for a young bird, “a while” can be just a day or two. She'd seen sun and showers and waves and wind and calm and clouds and decided, as young birds frequently do, that she'd seen it all. She was getting bored.

Besides, she wanted to fly.

One day when her mother was resting on the rock by the nest, she asked if it was time to fly. Her mother looked her over carefully – she was getting to be about the right size – but she shook her head no.

“All right then, tell me how,” the chick demanded.

“Well,” said her mother, and they paused because they were interrupted.

“Like this!” shrieked a chick in a nearby nest who had overheard the question. “You fly like this!” The chick leapt up and beat the air frantically with his wings. He didn't gain any height – in fact, he managed to propel himself backwards and bumped his head on the rocky side of the pali.

“No,” said her mother. “Not like that.”

The next day it was her father sitting by her on the ledge, and she asked him how to fly. “Well,” he said, and there was another interruption, this time from a ledge below them.

“Like this!” shrieked a chick, and opening her wings she hopped off the ledge. In a moment she’d vanished from their sight, and father and daughter had to crane their necks to look down. Fluttering madly, the chick was circling as it lost altitude and landed, panting, on the ocean. She paddled about miserably until she found a way to come ashore.

“No,” said father. “Not like that.”

The pathetic sounds of the chick, whose parents now fed her on a spray-soaked rock below, kept her silent for a few days. But only a few days. With both her parents next to her, she asked again, “How do I fly?” Then she added, “And don’t say, ‘Not like that.’”

Father looked at mother. Mother looked at father. They both looked at daughter. They looked at one another again. They nodded.

“Like this,” said mother, and she spread her wings. Father watched as the chick spread her wings in imitation of the mother’s and coached her until they were the same.

“Like this,” said the father, and spreading his wings likewise gave a series of powerful beats that lifted him into the air, then stopped to drop again.

“Like this,” said the mother, and she beat her wings and let them carry her farther into the air, rising slowly from the ledge.

“Like this,” said the father, and he rose just a bit higher as mother circled back.

“Like this?” said the daughter, and she let her wings raise her just a little way into the air, and then to her mother’s height, and then to her father’s.

“Just like this,” said both parents, and they circled, and dove, and soared – just like this.

Let’s be clear about the Pharisees and the scribes. They were the best teachers around, the best teachers of what it meant to faithfully honor God and to live as God intended. The Temple priests, let’s be honest, were busy people. Unlike the old days when Hannah’s prayers in the tabernacle caught the attention of Eli, priests in Jesus’ day were surrounded by the crowds and distractions of a bustling city. They led the rituals and performed the prayers. They left the teaching around the Temple to the scribes, and in the smaller villages to scribes and the Pharisaic leaders of the synagogues.

The scribes and the Pharisees were good teachers. They revered the ancient law. They made every effort to understand it and to figure out how to live it well in the changed circumstances of their time. The most ancient portions of the Law, after all, had been given to a mostly

nomadic people, a people without royal leadership who governed themselves with the traditional leadership of households and clans, whose worship sanctuary was a tent and not a building. By Jesus' day, the nation had become a kingdom, then lost its independence, then regained it, set up a new monarchy, and within fairly recent times come under the domination of generally resented foreign power. Figuring out what the ancient guidance meant in a new situation – well, it's what we do, isn't it?

The scribes and the Pharisees were good at figuring it out.

Not all of them – at any rate, those who challenged Jesus in the Temple, which means the most well established and most powerful – were good at doing what they had figured out. As Susan Hulen writes at Working Preacher, "The Pharisees' teachings are not a problem. But in their practice, the observance of the law becomes a burden that falls on the shoulders of others while the Pharisees reap public acclaim."

Note that Jesus gets very specific about the behavior. He tells his disciples not to act as these religious authorities act. He doesn't leave it as "not like them."

There is benefit to a negative example. Years ago in middle school I had a teacher who praised the value of "negative learning" – learning what you didn't like, or weren't interested in, or didn't fulfill your sense of purpose. Here in Jesus' critique of the religious leaders that surrounded him in the temple is a similar set of helpful negative examples. If you want to live faithfully, here are some things *not* to do. Don't tell people to do difficult and troublesome things if you're not doing them yourself. Don't tell people to do difficult and troublesome things if you're not going to help them do those things. Don't put on a show with public signs of your devotion, especially if those signs do not match the actual devotion of your heart. Don't wear your religion on your sleeve. Instead of a leather container for a Scripture verse bound to your forehead – that's what a phylactery is – we wear crosses for jewelry or put the name of our church on our T-shirts or baseball caps or face masks. Since moving to Hawai'i I have rarely donned the Geneva preaching gown I've worn for worship most of my professional life – but I choose my aloha shirt with great care.

And some of my stoles even have fringes.

"We all enjoy a prominent seat or desk from which to pontificate," Greg Carey writes at Working Preacher. "We all like our name in the credits, on the cover, or on the sign. But Matthew identifies authentic teachers as servants who seek neither promotion nor acclaim. Few of us fit that bill."

Few of us indeed. It should be more. It should be me. It should be you. It should be all of us.

Jesus didn't just leave us with that negative example, advising us to behave differently from his hapless opponents. He repeated the most difficult of all his teachings. "The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves

will be exalted.” Matthew refused to let us miss this. Jesus told his disciples this back in chapter 20. Here it is again in chapter 23. And lest we even so miss the point, Matthew is the writer who opened his account of Jesus’ ministry with the reversal pairs of the Beatitudes. Who are the blessed ones? The poor in spirit. The grieving. The meek. Those deprived of justice. The merciful. The pure in heart. The peacemakers. The persecuted.

In a world that called these people losers, in a world that still calls these people losers, Jesus called them the greatest of all.

Ralph Waldo Emerson asserted that the humility contributed to the development of strength when he wrote, “Our strength grows out of our weakness. The indignation which arms itself with secret forces does not awaken until we are pricked and stung and sorely assailed. A great man is always willing to be little.”

Carter Heyward, however, warns against a dangerous misreading of humility in *The Christian Century*: “Genuine humility is a gift from God which has nothing to do with downcast eyes, a misty voice and noble stories of sacrifice. Humility is, rather, living courageously in a spirit of radical connectedness with others, which enables us to see ourselves as God sees us: sisters and brothers, each as deeply valued and worthy of respect as every other. A truly humble man does not deny his self-interest but rather strives to realize how his interests are connected with the well-being of others, all others, not just those most like him. A genuinely humble woman does not seek to play herself down, as if she should be small and insignificant next to others, but rather is able to love herself fiercely and struggles to extend this strong love to all others by advocating for their dignity and well-being.”

That’s just what Jesus said, isn’t it? “Serve those around you.” See that they can live and thrive and rejoice in God’s creation. See that they can find the strength to fly.

As the koa’e kea asked, “How do we fly?” Not like that, for sure... We fly like this.

Amen.