

## THE AWKWARD AILMENT OF GATEKEEPING

Ashley Morris | Archdiocese of Atlanta | July 1, 2024

*“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You lock the kingdom of heaven before human beings. You do not enter yourselves, nor do you allow entrance to those trying to enter.” (Matthew 23:13)*

Of the many deeds and words attributed to Jesus found in the gospels, his denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees found in Matthew 23 provide particularly profound and prophetic messages worth greater consideration in our modern times. It is easy to take a casual glance at Christ’s condemnations and think of them as warnings for high-ranking church officials who fail to practice what they preach. However, we who live, worship and work in the twenty-first century can find the ancient teachings in the Bible relatable in more ways than one.

Sacred scripture and the Gospels, the divinely inspired Word of God as relayed to us through the evangelists, also serves as a mirror in which we see ourselves reflected in the emotions and experiences and perspectives of our forebearers in faith. Every character mentioned in the texts expresses an undeniable aspect, emotion, or situation of our humanity that transcends space and time. Or to say it differently, “There is nothing new under the sun.” What they went through “yesterday,” we experience *today* as well.

In the pericope chosen for this reflection, the scribes and Pharisees do not represent some far-removed, unrelatable cast of characters who failed to see Jesus the Nazorean as the transcendent God of the Israelites dwelling imminently and intimately among humanity. The scribes and Pharisees are individuals suffering from a time-old ailment that continues to plague us even as we speak, an ailment from which Christ seeks to rescue us.

The ailment, often referred to as “gatekeeping,” is defined as “...the act of controlling, and usually limiting, general access to something.” In and of itself, the act of controlling or limiting “...general access to something,” isn’t necessarily *a bad thing*. Gatekeeping can be a way to protect communities from the ill-intentioned actions of individuals or discourage behavior that can threaten or damage the common good. We’re easily reminded of this in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, where Abraham acknowledged “...a great chasm” separating the former from the latter and keeping them both from crossing between each other’s side in eternity (Luke 16: 26).

Gatekeeping can also be a nefarious action, creating opportunities and obstacles that divide and separate the Body of Christ into member groups of preferred or less desirable statuses. Black Catholic communities know this feeling all too well, our faith history rife with stories of being told where, when, and how our cultural expressions conflict with Catholicity *or vice versa*. Our access to resources, the availability of worship spaces, professional or educational opportunities, and even our recognition as active agents in the spread and development of our faith in its two



Fr. Robert Boxie, Archdiocese of Washington and Mr. Ashley Morris, Archdiocese of Atlanta

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thousand plus year history have all been impacted or impaired by a raised hand, palm facing outward, and a voice chiming in “Yeah, but not right now...”

The insidious nature of the gatekeeping ailment is such that we can inflict similar levels of separation on each other just as others outside our culture and faith inflict on us. Keep in mind the scribes and Pharisees subject to Roman authority were in the same community as Jesus, their calls for purity and fidelity relegating many of their own struggling sisters and brothers to the margins of society. Indeed, the insight of our elders rings true: “...hurt people *hurt* people.”

As we live in a time of parish mergers and Catholic school closings, office restructurings and position eliminating, young adult hemorrhaging and elders’ transitioning, the words “You’re not good enough,” whether tacitly implied or explicitly expressed, cause a deeply rooted harm we can quickly and easily impose on others. This reflection on gatekeeping now becomes necessary as our Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century struggles with many “... principalities, ... powers, ... rulers of this present darkness, ... [and] evil spirits ...” (Ephesians 6:12). These forces, enticing our faithful away from the Real Presence, driving our young people out of our Catholic institutions, slowly pushing our moral compass away from a Christ-driven, love-centered message of community and common good, are only strengthened when we create artificial boundaries based on whether someone is Black enough, Catholic enough, strong enough, “seasoned” enough, old enough, at Mass enough, rich enough, educated enough, focused enough, “man” enough, etc.

This notion becomes key to our efforts in welcoming sisters and brothers back to communal life post-COVID-19 isolation. Throughout numerous synodal listening sessions, congresses, conferences, pastorals, committee meetings, and post-Mass coffee cake conversations, the same call for more priests, Deacons, women religious, married folks, and young people is heard repeatedly. As that call seemingly remains answered by fewer individuals each time, little consideration is given to the question of whether we’re asking for the “perfect” people, or for people to be *perfected by God* in the process? Do we too look for certain criteria to be met before God’s work in us and through us can begin?

The good news about the Good News in Matthew 23:13 is that Jesus’ discourse against the scribes and Pharisees is more than an admonition of deviant behavior. Jesus’ message in Matthew is an opportunity for *metanoia*, a call for *all of us* to discern if our practices encourage discipleship or disillusionment. There are no prerequisites to encountering Jesus Christ, who on occasion gently chides human efforts of gatekeeping and edification in moments during His ministry (Matthew 19:13-15, Mark 9:38-41, Luke 22:24-28).

Jesus invites us to lament those times where we considered our own personal desires at the sacrifice of embracing the gifts of others. Jesus encourages us to think deeply on those moments when we may have propped our feet up on a sister or brother’s God-given place at the table. Most importantly, Jesus reminds us that whatever we do to the least of our sisters and brothers, be it good or bad, we also do to him. In this sense, excluding others from an intimate relationship with him is akin to denying the all-embracing love that *he is*.

Reflecting intentionally on our openness to engagement is a necessary step towards softening our hearts to new opportunities of evangelization and engagement. A renewed vigor focused on God frees us from the burden of attempting to do what God alone is wont to do. As the Holy Spirit moves

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through us, compelling us to “go” and make disciples of all nations, we remain careful avoid limiting the Spirit’s activity to a specific “type” of person or situation or life experience or ability or gender or skill or knowledge base. After all, even Nathaniel eventually proclaimed the kingship of Jesus after questioning if anything good could come out of Nazareth (John 1:46).

In these instances, the answers don’t revolve around what we can’t do, but rather what we can and should do for the sake of the gospel. The answers don’t revolve around what we don’t have, but what we *do* have and how we can utilize those resources creatively. If gatekeeping is a way to protect what is, the alternative is to turn our eyes towards God and *what could be*, losing ourselves in Him as he guides us to those moments and individuals and opportunities He’s already claimed as His own.

Let us thank God for the opportunity reconsider our means and methods of encounter and accompaniment, to turn around from these awkward moments of gatekeeping towards the bright, shining face of our Lord who calls all to him. Let the timeless nature of the scriptures echo in our hearts and reverberate in our actions throughout all the world. *Amen.*