

*A sermon given on Sunday, October 30, 2011  
At St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio,  
By the Reverend Alan M. Gates, Rector*

### **Checking our Alignment**

The family car which we most recently traded in was a 1997 model, driven for twelve years. This followed a pattern instilled by my parents, who never kept a car less than a decade. The '63 Rambler American was followed by the '74 Datsun, and so it went. One consequence of this longevity of auto ownership was learning about the matter of alignment. In older cars, especially, the wheels must be adjusted to keep the proper relationship between wheels and road. Wheels not properly aligned can result in excessive tire wear and, more hazardously, steering problems.

Other sorts of things also can be properly aligned, or not. This past week I attended a 3-day seminar for clergy in large congregations. The Alban Institute consultant stressed the importance of alignment in the church: alignment between the church's mission and its ministerial resources. "Keeping the entire structure aligned and focused is one of the greatest challenges in the large church," she says.

The Gospel text today [Mt 23:1-12] is also about alignment. It's not about the alignment of wheels to road, nor the alignment of organizational structure to mission. It is about the alignment of religious values to actual behavior.

Throughout the Gospels Jesus is forbearing, forgiving, highly tolerant of weaknesses and imperfections. Yet again and again he loses that forbearance when it comes to the Scribes and Pharisees. Along the way he calls them blind fools, vipers, and perhaps most famously, hypocrites. In today's lesson Jesus spells out what is perhaps his foundational objection to the behavior of the Pharisees. They are out of moral alignment. Their teachings are correct, their religious tenets are evidently sound. But their actions do not bear out that which they espouse. "Do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach." Jesus expected the Pharisees as leaders to match their teachings with their practice, and he found them out of alignment.

Of course, he expected the same right relationship of belief and practice to be evident from all of God's people, not just the Pharisees. In last week's Gospel we heard Jesus' great summary of all the law and the prophets: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind; and love your neighbor as yourself.

*Love of God (Deuteronomy 6:5) and love of neighbor (Leviticus 19:18) are basic principles embedded in the Torah. Jesus' innovation lay in the claim that the two are indivisible: Love of God is love of neighbor, and vice versa. ... [Jesus] invested one's neighbor with the attribute of God's presence in the world, so that loving that person is tantamount to worship of God.<sup>i</sup>*

Our espoused love of God and our actual love of neighbor should be aligned. This, at rock bottom, is the religious principle by which our every act, our every decision should be evaluated.

We are coming up on All Saints Day, November 1, which we will observe liturgically next week on All Saints Sunday. It is always a glorious celebration of our part in the Mystical Communion of All the Faithful. I've told you before, no doubt, the story of one of my mentors, the late Bishop Bob Anderson, who on a parish call in northern Minnesota asked a young boy about his idea of a saint. "A saint," said the boy, "is someone whose insides and outsides match." It's my favorite definition of a saint. Someone whose insides and outsides match. Someone with integrity. Someone whose faith and convictions are made manifest by their real-life decisions and actions. Someone whose faith wheels are in alignment with the road of life.

It is our lifelong task as Christians to strive for this – to render ever more thorough the conformity of our lives to that of Christ; to strive, if you will, for sainthood by matching our insides and our outsides; to align our religious and moral commitments with our actions. Unlike the wheels on our cars, this cannot be done for us by someone else. Like the automotive wheels, it will have to be done not once and for all, but again and again and again.

Such alignment takes place wherever we have the opportunity, yea the responsibility, to love God by loving our neighbor. It is manifest in our personal interactions at home, at work, and on the street. It is manifest in our priorities of time, energy, and resources. And it is manifest in our personal decisions about communal matters as well. We are constantly forming opinions and sometimes taking action on matters of common concern, globally and locally. We will do so again next week, when this year's ballot holds an unusually high number of questions about our communal life. There are questions about access to education. There are questions about access to health care. There are questions about how we attach value to the work that others do.

Let me say this about that: It is possible that people of faith will arrive at conflicting opinions about what is right to do. It is not possible that people of faith will consider it unimportant to decide. It really does matter.

I am well aware that some of us get very nervous when faith and politics draw near to one another. But the two cannot be separated altogether, for if they are, we will have abandoned an entire dimension of our life – the communal dimension – to the absence of any moral evaluation. Anglican bishop Hugh Montefiore has articulated three reasons that the Christian cannot avoid political choices.

*(1) We all have an obligation to speed the Kingdom of God. ... There are those who say that the Good News of the Gospel is concerned only with spiritual matters, such as salvation. But salvation is a word which includes wholeness in its meaning. Human beings have bodily needs which must be met, and material goods are needed if those are to be met. ... The better ordering of human society is a political matter in which Christians must be involved.*

- (2) *Christians were ordered by Jesus to love their neighbors as themselves. In [communal] activities love expresses itself primarily as justice. ... Justice for the citizens of a nation can only be obtained by political means.*
- (3) *Christians must also give priority to the needs of the poor. In the Old Testament there are special injunctions to ensure that the poor are not neglected. In the New Testament Jesus pays special attention to the poor [and suggests] that in helping the needy, people are coming into contact with himself. 'In as much as you did it to the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.' As we have seen, charity is not enough: the poor need justice.<sup>ii</sup>*

This is not to say that every decision we will need to make is simple or self-evident. It requires us to sort out many things and weigh them against the Law of Love. In these difficult economic times it requires us to acknowledge that economic considerations are one very important criterion in any decision, but not the only criterion. In his seminal work, *Christianity and the Social Order*, Anglican Archbishop William Temple wrote:

*As children of God, men and women are members one of another, and their true development is that of an ever richer personal experience in an ever wider and deeper fellowship. If then an economic system is abundantly successful in producing and distributing wealth, but creates and intensifies divisions and hostilities between [people], that system is condemned, not on economic but on moral grounds; not because it fails to deliver the goods, but because it is a source of wrong relationships.<sup>iii</sup>*

We separate our political decisions from our faith convictions to the peril of our communities, our nation, and our own soul. It is all about alignment.

As the ballot issues of next week approach, I urge you to consider them not as political issues in isolation, not as economic issues in isolation, but as matters that intersect with your faith. I encourage you to be in dialogue with one another, to be in dialogue with your own faith, and to consider deeply how the Law of Love might inform your judgments.

In these, as in all our decisions, as best you can and by God's grace, I invite you to check your faith alignment.

---

<sup>i</sup> Bruce Chilton, "Altruism in Christianity," in *Altruism in World Religions*; Jacob Neusner and Bruce Chilton, eds. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2005), pp. 64-65.

<sup>ii</sup> Hugh Montefiore, *Credible Christianity: The Gospel in Contemporary Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993), pp. 253-254.

<sup>iii</sup> William Temple, *Christianity and the Social Order* (London, 1942), p. 80; as cited in Montefiore, *op. cit.*, p. 256.