

“Greatness Defined”

Valley Presbyterian Church – November 2, 2008

All Saint’s Sunday

Joshua 1:1-9

Rev. John Wahl

Matthew 23:1-12

The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted. (Matthew 23:11b, 12)

Jesus speaks these words to the crowds and the disciples with full knowledge that he was about to be asked to follow the will of His Father even to death, to show them greatness by sacrificing himself. And yet, Jesus is also asking his listeners to recognize that they have also been created for greatness, but in a way that is different from the way the world defines it. All of our human titles – like rabbi, teacher – are meaningless because they cause people to forget that all good things – like leadership and wisdom – come from God. They are not earned; they are gifts of the creator.

Graham Standish writes, “the concept of humility is grounded in the story of Genesis and is a thread woven throughout the fabric of the Bible. Humility is grounded in our creation. The word *human* comes from the Latin for dirt, *humus*. To become humble means, first, to recognize our earthiness, our creation from dust. Humility is a recognition that we are made of the same stuff as the rest of the universe.”¹

This morning’s readings from Matthew and Joshua provide instruction about who we are in relation to God; and therefore who we are as a community of Christ’s people. These Old and New Testament passages share a common theme of the link between God-given Law and human agents who are called to put the Law into practice; a connection that is successfully embodied in the story of Joshua, but is woefully distorted in the practices of the Pharisees.

Over the centuries, the Pharisees have been viewed with everything from disgust and contempt to empathy and sadness. Their focus was on holiness, but as Jesus points out, they set themselves apart by their fancy prayers and even fancier clothes. Samuel Shoemaker argues that the Pharisees were “just ordinary, good people, in whom goodness had ceased to be original and gone to seed.”² In other words, as leaders of their religion and society, they no longer bore fruit; instead, by their hyper-observance of rules and rituals, they created a heavier burden for others to bear.

I officiated a funeral service a couple of years ago for Elmer, described by his loved ones as a “man of few words.” He married at 20 years old, right before entering the Navy during World War II. He worked almost his entire life at the same company. He loved baseball. And he had two twin boys.

¹ Graham Standish, *Humble Leadership*, p. 13.

² Samuel Shoemaker, “Hoe God Levels Human Pride” in *Lectionary Homiletics*, Nov. 2002.

His sons recounted for those who attended the funeral service that Elmer was also very meticulous about his yard – maybe even a little neurotic. Every time the grass was cut – first by Elmer himself, later by his sons and, after they moved out on their own – once again by Elmer – it had to be cut twice: once with rows in one direction, then with rows in the next. In their teenage years, the two sons did not understand why they had to cut the grass twice; only that their dad told them it was their job to do it that way. With hindsight, though, the twin boys realized this was their father’s way of showing them equal amounts of love, by giving them this shared responsibility. There was no favorite because they were both favorites, both created to serve and treated equally so that they both might recognize the love of the father.

The first and possibly most important message that Jesus offers in light of the Pharisees’ hypocrisy is that God our creator is the loving parent of all human daughters and sons. Thus, in both physical and spiritual terms, none are truly self-made. For no matter how much we try to claim and assert our independent accomplishments, we bear the unmistakable marks of a divine ancestry. This is a heritage that all humans – every one of us that God formed from the dirt – share equally. The Pharisees had become a people who did not put into practice what they taught to others. The Law had become, for them, a weapon to assert their authority, to put a burden on others, while they felt no obligation to lighten the load of others. They believed, because they were the teachers, that service was someone else’s job, but it only separated them from their students; and, as a result, from God as well.

Jesus encounters these religious leaders, the Pharisees sitting on the Moses seat, which was the designated place of honor in the Temple from which scripture readings and religious pronouncements were made. The name itself served as a reminder to Jews that the Law came to Moses from God, and not from the mouths of those speaking. In our modern context, we may find the Moses seat in any number of places: at the pulpit or in classroom, or at the office or even around the family dinner table. Yet, the messages of truth communicated, and the gospel proclaimed, still derive from God and not from any particular agent of God who might speak the words.

In Jesus’ day, the Pharisee’s view of the Law had grown so static, so focused on the rules, that their authority had become associated with a seat, a chair. Surely, this says something about the state of religious faith then, and arguably about its condition today. Moses had never been one to be associated with sitting on a chair; instead he was active and mobile: leading the people on a journey of faith which included the receiving of the Law. Likewise, we rarely envision Jesus in a passive role: sitting around, telling others what to do. Instead, he defined and refined the Law through his actions, then instructing his followers to *go and do likewise*. (Luke 10:37)

One of the greatest strengths of any community of faith rests in the fact that its leaders must also be followers of Jesus: disciples who are humble, and yet – in the words of God’s commission to Joshua, strive to be *strong and courageous...not frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go*. (Joshua 1:9) By leader,

of course, I mean not only elders, deacons and staff of the church, but each of you who lead by praying, listening, asking, checking-in, making, mending, watching, teaching, sharing and caring. A part of humility, and a part of greatness in God's eyes, is in sharing our God-given gifts, but also in recognizing that God can empower you to do things beyond ourselves, beyond our abilities, beyond our perceived limitations, and beyond our human nature.

If we point to the Lord and not ourselves, if we are humble, fertile humus, with God's help we can be faithful, good, earthy people for Jesus.³ If we recognize that God does not play favorites – does not lift up people to special positions of power – but wants all of us to be servants of one another, then we can indeed be lifted high, exalted. Exalted not by praise or thanks from one another, for many of us do not want or seek recognition for the ways we offer ourselves to one another. Instead, we will be exalted by God, who raises us up not through fancy clothes or important titles or seats of honor, but through a journey in which we can see God along the way; a life that we can live with God as our teacher, Christ our companion and the Spirit as our guide and counselor.

The greatest among you will be your servant (Matthew 23:11) proclaimed Jesus our teacher and savior. *The Lord your God is with you wherever you go*, (Joshua 1:9) declared our eternal Father. Let us, at the Lord's Table, eat and drink from the blessings that God has provided; that it might sustain us on this and all of our days. AMEN.

Hear the word of God given to us in the Psalms: *Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord... Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, his steadfast love endures forever.* (Psalm 118:26, 29) AMEN.

³ Roy Lloyd, "Charades and Reality," from *Day One*, Nov. 3, 2002.