

Sermon: "A Call for Humility"

Scripture Lessons: Joshua 3:7-17, Matthew 23:1-12

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Our first scripture reading on this All Saints' Day is Joshua 3:7-17. The Book of Joshua begins with another miraculous parting of the sea as the Israelites cross the Jordan River into the Promised Land. They cross over without Moses, however they have the law to guide them and the Ark of the Covenant to accompany them, symbolizing God's presence. The God who created humanity from the dust of the earth and breathed life into them, the God who formed the Israelite people like a Potter molds the clay will make a way. By the grace of God goes each one of us. Hear now God's Holy Word.

*The Lord said to Joshua, "This day I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, so that they may know that I will be with you as I was with Moses. You are the one who shall command the priests who bear the ark of the covenant, "When you come to the edge of the waters of the Jordan, you shall stand still in the Jordan." Joshua then said to the Israelites, "Draw near and hear the words of the Lord your God." Joshua said, "By this you shall know that among you is the living God who without fail will drive out from before you the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites, and Jebusites: the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is going to pass before you into the Jordan. So now select twelve men from the tribes of Israel, one from each tribe. When the soles of the feet of the priests who bear the ark of the Lord, the Lord of all the earth, rest in the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan flowing from above shall be cut off; they shall stand in a single heap." When the people set out from their tents to cross over the Jordan, the priests bearing the ark of the covenant were in front of the people. Now the Jordan overflows all its banks throughout the time of harvest. So when those who bore the ark had come to the Jordan, and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the edge of the water, the waters flowing from above stood still, rising up in a single heap far off at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan, while those flowing toward the sea of the Arabah, the Dead Sea, were wholly cut off. Then the people crossed over opposite Jericho. While all Israel were crossing over on dry ground, the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the Lord stood on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan, until the entire nation finished crossing over the Jordan. Amen.*

Our second scripture reading is Matthew 23:1-12. Jesus, who was baptized in the Jordan River which the Israelites crossed several hundred years earlier, is disturbed by the scribes and Pharisees who are teachers and interpreters of the law in the line of Moses. What troubles Jesus about these religious leaders is not the law "which he came to fulfill" rather he cannot abide with their vanity, hypocrisy and arrogance...traits that are always distasteful, and particularly when characteristics of religious people and their leaders. Listen now for the Word of God.

*Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted. Amen.*

The title of the sermon: "A Call for Humility"

*The Text: All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted. Matthew 23:12*

Let us pray: Holy and Loving God, as we reflect on Jesus' call for humility, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

On this All Saints' Day, we gather as a faith community to affirm the "priesthood of all believers," one of the major tenants of the Reformation. What began with Martin Luther posting 95 theses in Wittenberg, Germany to challenge the church hierarchy and abuse of power that "Hallowed Eve" of All Saints' Day, October 31, 1517 culminated in John Calvin's theological affirmation that all God's children are "priests" or "saints," having equal access to God through Christ, the only High Priest. Ordained clergy are men and women, called to preach the word and to administer the sacraments. They are not the sole conduit to God or the keeper of heaven's gates!

Today we honor the memory of Westminster's saints who have died this year, each equally a beloved child of God. As we join in the celebration of the Sacrament of Baptism and welcome a newborn into the family, we are reminded of God's steadfast love and mercy throughout the generations and the richness of our faith which accepts our mortality, affirms our equality, and rejoices in the God who gives us life and who welcomes us home at the end of our lives.

As I was contemplating Christ's call for humility on this All Saints' Day, a familiar baseball analogy came to my mind. "Some people are born on third base and go through life thinking they hit a triple." Although not avid baseball followers, Peter and I are fans of this analogy which refers to a person of privilege who lacks insight into the advantages received and who takes credit and sole responsibility for one's record of accomplishments. As we have sought to instill a sense of humility and a recognition of the white, male privileges from which our son has benefited, it has not been uncommon through the years to hear in the Kieffer household a light-hearted reminder to our hard-working and accomplished Paul that he did not hit a triple!

The Los Angeles Dodgers won the World Series this week sixty-five years after the first time they won as the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1955 with Major League Baseball's first African American player on their team, Jackie Robinson.

In 1946, Branch Rickey, Methodist, team manager and owner, put himself at the forefront of history when he signed Jackie Robinson to the Brooklyn Dodgers, breaking Major League Baseball's infamous color line. Surely Branch's faith and early lessons learned at the progressive Ohio Wesleyan University, which admitted students regardless of race, religion, and gender, colored that resourceful, courageous, and bold decision.

Facing violent, unabashed racism from every side, Robinson was forced to demonstrate tremendous humility, courage, and restraint by not reacting, instead letting his talent on the field do the talking-ultimately winning over fans and his teammates, silencing his critics, and paving the way for others to follow.

In 1997, Major League Baseball retired the number 42 for all teams, making it the first number in sports to be universally retired. Just a few years later, our son Paul wrote his first third grade

book report on Jackie. In 2013, the movie “42” told his powerful story with another humble hero, Chadwick Boseman, starring as Robinson.

This year will be remembered, along with the pandemic, as the year of affirming that black lives matter. This year is also the year of the tragic and untimely death of one of our saints, Chadwick Boseman, who valiantly portrayed black heroes as he humbly and privately received treatment for terminal cancer and became a role model and a hero himself for so many children of color. Therefore, the Dodgers’ victory is timely and a reason to rejoice! It is an opportunity to remember the saints along the way who have courageously advocated for equality and respect and who have embodied the humility beckoned by Christ.

Humility is a characteristic that is not held in high esteem in our culture. The dictionary defines humility as being modest and respectful, lacking pretense, and not believing that one is superior to others. The Latin word for *humility* is very close to the Latin word for *humanity* and means to be *grounded, from the earth*. Humility affirms one’s intrinsic self-worth as a child of God, formed from the earth by the Potter into a human being.

Some mistakenly interpret humility as a lack of self-confidence or timidity. In reality, the person who is humble has a strong sense of self in relation to others and to God. A humble person understands he or she is not the center of the universe...but a small part of the whole created by a loving and reliable God, with a particular calling or vocation. It is because of a strong self-worth that a person is able to be humble, to respect, to honor, and even to submit oneself to others.

Humility is about having confidence without arrogance! It is the antithesis of *hubris*, that excessive, outspoken, arrogant pride which often leads to a person’s demise and to the disrespect of others.

Our teacher and our Savior, the one who joined us in our humanity, calls for humility among the priesthood of all believers and among the saints of the church. Christ’s call for humility is emphatic and enthusiastic, perhaps because he knew from his own experience how destructive arrogance could be, especially among religious and political leaders.

Beloved in Christ, let us respond to the call for humility, let us embrace our humanity, let us honor our brothers and sisters, and, for those of us who were born on third base, let us hold fast and affirm we did not hit a triple. Amen.