

Sermon Proper 26 A 2011

Joshua 3:7-17

Psalm 107:1-7, 33-37

1 Thessalonians 2:9-13

Matthew 23:1-12

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To everything there is a time and a season. Fall is stunning with the red maples along with mums and pansies with their vibrant colors. Endings can be glorious things. This morning we have reached the end of the Moses saga. What began with the story of baby Moses placed adrift in the reed basket concludes this morning. Our journey with Jesus through Matthew's gospel is approaching its end as well. Conflict is intensifying as Jesus' mission is drawing closer to its end. Signs of endings are all around us. Our journey through the church year has but a few weeks to go as well.

Next Sunday is the Feast of All Saints, when we will baptize and reflect upon the fact that God is calling each of us to sainthood. Then three Sundays from today, on November 20, the church year will conclude. The final Sunday in the church year is known as the Feast of Christ the King and we will celebrate in grand style with our annual meeting at 9:30 a.m. and a festive Centennial Birthday Party following the 10:30 service. Just three Sundays away, a treat you will not want to miss.

But let's begin with Moses, the preeminent OT prophet. The cycle that began with the infant Moses has come full circle. Moses was the great deliverer of his people Israel. He led them out of captivity in Egypt and for forty years they journeyed through the wilderness, finally arriving at the edge of the promise land. As we heard along the way, the Israelites were not terribly faithful or thankful. They complained about the lack of water. So God provided the miracle at Meribah when Moses struck the rock and water flowed. They complained about the lack of bread and meat, so God gave them manna and rained quails from heaven as well. God provided but it did not stop their complaining. Several weeks ago, we heard the account of the golden calf. Moses had been away upon the holy mountain conversing with God. The people became anxious and Aaron gathered all the gold and fashioned the golden calf for them to worship.

So God in his anger said, "this generation shall not enter into my rest." So Moses led a generation of people through the wilderness towards the land of promise but it fell to Joshua to actually lead the people into the land of Canaan as our lesson described today.

God's anger prevented an entire generation from reaching their intended destiny. It gives us pause as we reflect upon our generation's behavior.

Our gospel gives us reason to pause as well. Jesus, the faithful Pharisee and rabbi takes issue with the behavior that he is witnessing. The Pharisees are not practicing what they teach.

We know well that actions speak louder than words. We know that people are looking closely at all aspects of leadership. We live in a world where most of what we do does not go

unobserved or unrecorded. This is especially true in public life. Yet, we witness time and again people (some even of faith) who fail to practice what they teach or preach.

Jesus draws attention to the fact that the Pharisaic tradition, the tradition that he is most likely a part of, is falling short of God's hopes and expectations. They are teaching correctly. Jesus says to the crowds, "do whatever they teach you and follow it." The teaching was faithful but the follow through was not. Alas that is the problem isn't it. We know that problem all too well, I suspect. The Apostle Paul certainly was familiar with the human condition. We remember Paul's lament, "The good that I would do, I cannot seem to do." So Paul finds it a rule that when he wants to do good watch out because evil lies close at hand.

The Pharisees teach faithfully, but they are also led by their pride. They have that narcissistic streak that longs for recognition and acclaim. This tendency, the desire for recognition and attention has grown ever more acutely in our day and time.

We all want to be respected but that is not what Jesus is talking about here. Jesus is addressing humility and its opposite conceit or grandiosity. The Pharisees were full of themselves. That is what caused the tension between Jesus and the Pharisees. Jesus was not only talking the talk, he was walking the walk. The Pharisees on the other hand were talking the talk and then strutting around in their religious finery, but they were not faithfully observant. They failed to live into the kingdom life that they preached with fervor.

Jesus draws the crowds and disciples' attention away from earthly titles and leaders towards the source of our teaching and authority, to God. What the theologian Paul Tillich called, "the ground of our being." We are called to live the commandments faithfully. And faith calls us to action. That action is not to be trumpeted but rather done in quiet obedience and persistence. Persistent and continuous just like water on rock.

St. John's is filled with patient and persistent disciples of Jesus. They are active in all aspects of community life, some very public and some very private. Yet each is following the commandments of Jesus, to love God and to love our neighbor. Despite these many examples and my temptation to preach about them, I have discovered that this can be problematic. Sharing examples so close to home can leave some people out and hurt feelings are not what discipleship is about. Discipleship as Jesus describes it this morning is about walking the walk, not just talking the talk.

It is safer to share some stories of faithful disciples, of saints in the making, from my experience in my former parish in Hopkinsville.

When I arrived a member of the parish was very ill with Parkinson's disease. He had been an internist and he had cared for most of the parish and many in the community. He was beloved and the parish showed their care in ways both large and small. Despite his confinement to a wheelchair, he was still included in Sunday worship and all the social gatherings. His friend, the semi retired orthopedic surgeon, Joe, used to carry two lengths of 2x6's in his car. Whenever there was a dinner or party, Joe would get there ahead of time and lay out the 2x6's so that his friend (Peter) could be rolled up the ramp and attend the party. No home was inaccessible in this way.

Friday evenings usually meant a delightful dinner at Joe and his wife Pam's home. There a faithful group of friends from the church gathered faithfully and the boards were in place there as well and their friend included. One night as folks were gathering I overheard a phone call that Joe received. It seems that someone had fallen and wondered if they should go to the ER for x-rays. Joe replied, "I was just on the way out, I'll swing by your house and have a look." Then Joe quietly walked out the door and returned a short while later. He never said who he saw and never complained about leaving the gathering. After all he was just on the way out.

Then there is the story of Bobo the local printer. His print shop, Blue Streak Printing, was downtown and to enter was to step back in time, way back. Bobo had no computers, no modern printers. His print shop contained all the old hand set type machines from years past. And they were all still in use. Bobo did most of the stationary for the businesses in town. All of it by hand, it was quite a process to watch.

But what impressed me most about Bobo was his annual Christmas party. He threw open the doors and decorated beautifully. Then he invited everyone, especially the down and out, the homeless and others who spent their days wandering around town. Christmas carols would be sung followed by punch and seasonal delights. But like many Christmas gatherings it was the gift giving at the end that was the high point. You see, Bobo seemed to know all his guests, especially the less fortunate and he also knew what they needed for Christmas. Each present was chosen with care. There was a new sweatshirt for one, new coveralls for one, a portable heater for another, kitchen utensils for another. It was really extraordinary. There in that antique print shop was a party right out of a Dickens novel.

Jesus said, "The greatest among you will be your servant."

We are not called to be exalted, but to serve. That is what Jesus encouraged when he said, "I am among you as one who serves." Jesus calls us to serve as well. We are to be open to God's call in our lives. That call may come at any time and under any circumstance. We never outgrow this call and we are never done living into it. It is the primary call of our lives. We are to love God and that love is lived out in our relationship with our neighbors.

Make no mistake saints like Joe and Pam and Bobo live in this community as well. Like the stories I shared, the people I know here are saints in the making also. Watching you live your lives of faith encourages me. It is by watching others walk the walk that I am encouraged to do the same.

Jesus is calling each of us to sainthood. The life of a saint is not one of wide acclaim, rich lifestyles, self-serving actions, personal promotion, and fame. Sainthood is totally different. Sainthood is humble and Jesus is calling each of us. Calling us to let go and follow him. To follow Jesus on the path that God holds before us. Now there are many pathways in front of each one of us. Many are tempting and appealing some even seductive. But the way of Jesus is not one of fame, but service. Surprisingly, it is in offering ourselves to others that we truly learn who we are. And more than that we learn whose we are. Disciples are called to walk the walk reaching out to the people whom God has drawn us into relationship with.

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