

All Saint's Day Sermon: The Greatest Among Us by Pastor Jenn

Scripture: Matthew 23:1-12

Here's the background to that Matthew text. Jesus is upset with some religious leaders. This has been building for sometime. In fact if we go back a few chapters, we see who he is fighting with. Like in Matthew 21 begins with Jesus coming into Jerusalem riding on a donkey and he is praised as a Savior, by the people mind you, not the rabbis. Following that parade, he goes to the Temple and throws out the money changers and corrects the teachers who allowed this act by reminding them of the Scripture that says:¹³ *"It is written," he said to them, "My house will be called a house of prayer, and it is not to be a den of robbers.*

Then he is drawn to heal those in need. But he also continues to be challenged by some religious leaders, including in the next chapter when he is asked the greatest commandment and he responds Matthew 22: 37 *'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.'*³⁸ *This is the first and greatest commandment.*³⁹ *And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'*

Now, in Matthew 23, Jesus warns against hypocrisy: that is saying one thing and doing another. And he points out there were some current Temple leaders that were doing that. He says,² *"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.*⁴ *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.* Jesus even adds:⁵ *They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long.* A phylactery (fə'laktərē) was a small leather box containing Hebrew texts on parchment paper, worn by Jewish men at morning prayer as a reminder to keep the law. Jesus says these particular leaders are all about show- showing off their importance. He then adds,⁶ *They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues,*⁷ *and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi.*

Jesus is obviously upset with the current Temple leaders. And so *Jesus will give a warning for his disciples then and now,* he ends this part of the passage with verse 11,¹¹ *The greatest among you will be your servant.*¹² *All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.*

What Matthew gets at with this text is, Jesus doesn't have much time left, and he wants his disciples to know religion needs to be different for his disciples. It needs to be about service and support. It needs to be about love and honor. It needs to be about humility and faithfulness. By doing so, provides an example of Christianity for the world to see and witness. What God has done in Jesus through humility and service is to be proclaimed by the followers of Jesus, through our own service and humility.

Today is All Saint's Day. This is the day we recall those who have passed from this life into the next. And in particular, we want to lift up the names of those connected to our church family that have departed us this past year. And as I was reviewing that list today, I recognized that each and everyone of them were humble servants. Servants to their families, their communities, and their church.

Like Wilma Etchberger who not only loved her family, she liked them too! They were her joy, her and when she wasn't working, or serving at the church, which she did often, with her sister, Ginny, she was spending time with, encouraging them, love them. We give thanks for her today.

We give thanks as well for Helen Farnsler who loved this town, this community because Helen was a people person. She enjoyed people and connected with them. More than that she had a special bond with her daughter, loving and inspiring her in her faith and life. We give thanks for Helen.

Ronald Goodman is another saint we remember today. I confess I only had the opportunity to meet Ron once at our church, but I heard the wonderful ways he blessed the church. From serving as the church's treasurer, to an usher who was always friendly and welcoming, to his portrayal of Bartholomew in the church's Last Supper portrayal. And beyond the church, I have heard how he blessed the lives of his family and this community, with his kindness, laughter, and dedication to the local hockey leagues. He left a mark and we give thanks for him today.

Lynne Brenneman. A woman who gave of herself to bless others with her acts of mercy and kindness. She did this with her family and with the Church. She was so inspiring, that many of us value and cherish the times we had with her. To this day I keep a prayer request Lynn gave me to remember the people of Ukraine. Lynne's heart was good and right, and we give thanks for her influence on us.

We also give thanks for Gladys Chestnut who loved family trips to the cabin or to Ocean City, New Jersey. She also could play the piano, offering inspiration through playing hymns and the classics. She gave of herself to share that gift, she gave of herself to praise the Lord heart, mind, body, and soul.

Another saint we recall today is John Hoerner. When I think of John, I recall the texts from Ecclesiastes 3 telling us that for everything there is a season. And in learning about John, I heard how he had some amazing seasons that included teaching, mentoring, coaching. But also seasons of loving friends, loving family, loving his God and his church. We give thanks for John and those seasons.

We give thanks for Meredith Cravener who had such faith that she once told me: "I know where I am going, and I hope my family and friends know too." She lived a life encouraging that revelation, and we thank God for her witness.

Today we also celebrate Earlene Deal. One Saturday afternoon I received a call from her asking for a visit. When I met with her she confessed she was struggling with some pain, but she believed that God could help her, therefore she called on me, and together we prayed for God's comfort in her life. The pain was not taken away quickly, but when I checked in on her a few days later, she said the comfort of our prayer time together helped her, as it reminded her to let her worries and fears go, and trust in God's abiding presence.

Another saint we lift up today is the Rev. Luke Carlson. When I think about Luke, I think about the legacy he gave. Did you know he began his ministry at age 16, driving his 1937 Ford to fill pulpit vacancies for his older college classmates? And then he went on to serve 8 different appointments for the UM church. When he did retire, he served here, teaching, counseling, ministering to us. We give thanks for Luke's wisdom and his deep sense of compassion and mercy for all.

And the final saint from our congregation that we give thanks for is Fay Faust. I was told whenever there was a need, you could rely on Fay to help in any way. She did that with her family and her church. And even though in the end she suffered from Alzheimer's, not always remembering things from one minute to the next, she remembered her faith, including the words to the Lord's Prayer.

Friends, these saints need to be celebrated today because of their service to their families, their community, their Church. They weren't outspoken, they didn't parade themselves around, they quietly did their work as a portrayal of their faith, and we, along with many others were blessed for their actions.

And I can just imagine that as Jesus welcomed them to their next life, he did so with open arms that claimed them as the greatest among us.

Let us pray: We come before you today, O God, remembering those who have gone before us as ancestors in the faith. We know that, like them, we too are called to be your witnesses in every part of our lives. Teach us to walk humbly in the light of your presence and help us to live faithfully and joyously in our own day. Amen.