

Jim Gill

November 5, 2017

"Serve"

Joshua 3:7-17 Matthew 23:1-12 I Thessalonians 2:9-13

#### INTRODUCTION TO JOSHUA 3:7-17

The reading from the Old Testament describes an event that happened in the life of the Children of Israel as they prepared to enter the Promised Land. They had been at this very spot 40 years before, but 10 out of 12 spies recommended that they not try to enter because their cities were walled and there were "giants in the land." (Numbers 13:30-33)

Joshua was one of the spies who presented a minority report that said that with God they could take the land. Now, after 40 years of wandering because they went with the majority, Joshua stands on the banks of the Jordan, much like his predecessor Moses stood on the banks of the Red Sea. Hear the word of the Lord from Joshua 3:7-17.

#### INTRODUCTION TO MATTHEW 23:1-12

Last week we examined the last passage of politicians trying to trap Jesus with a question. They walked away like a prosecutor who has been thwarted at every turn mumbling, "No further questions." In this week's lesson Jesus turns to the crowds and gives his take on those who have been trying to trap him with their questions. Hear what Jesus has to say about the politicians of his day from Matthew 23:1-12

Let's pray.

Dear Lord, we know that pride goes before a fall. We can't imagine what it must have been like for you to humble yourself to the point on taking on human form, much less the form of one who came not to be served, but to serve. Lord Jesus, if you could humble yourself to that point, how can we do anything but follow your example. Open our ears to hear, our minds to perceive, and our hearts to respond to this your word. Amen.

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On Halloween I went with my son and daughter and their spouses to Minute Maid Park to watch TV. Game 6. On All Saints night I watched it at home alone. I enjoyed being with family on Halloween surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. I liked the alone All Saints night results much better. The Astros are the 2017 Champions of Major League Baseball. (Put on Hat)

The payroll of the Dodgers on opening day was the highest of all 30 teams at \$242,065,828. The Astros payroll on opening day came in at #18 at \$124,343,900 almost half the payroll. The Dodgers topped the average 2017 payroll by more than \$100,000,000. The salary of the Dodgers ace pitcher, Clayton Kershaw, was \$33,000,000, which is more that the Padres are paying for all 25 players on their active roster. The humbler payroll rolled.

Stephanie Thomas posted an interview of Jose Altuve, the second baseman for the Astros on the Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon. During that interview they showed a picture of Jose, who stands at 5 feet 6 inches tall standing on first base next to Aaron Judge, the first baseman for the New York Yankees who is 6 foot 7 and 282 pounds. Jose said about Aaron, 'He's a great guy. He's super humble.'

I love it. Super humble. If you're going to be humble why not go all the way to Super Humble!

I was curious so I went to Aaron Judge's Facebook page to learn more about him and the banner across his home page says, "We walk by faith, not by sight." 2 Corinthians 5:7. Super humble.

Jesus said, "Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." Those who are super humbled by super stars like Jose will be super exalted. (In case you weren't following the Yankees lost to the Astros in the American League Championship Series).

To be able to do that though, the Astros had to be super humbled. They lost over 100 games a year for 3 years in a row. Those humbling losses enabled them to draft players to build a team that could win 102 games in the regular season and 11 in the post season and the Championship.

Our story from Joshua this morning involved some people who had to go through some humbling before they could see their Promised Land. When Joshua stood by the banks of the Jordan River it was the second time he did so. Forty years earlier he and Caleb had submitted a minority report that with God they would be able to take the Promised Land. They were outvoted 10 to 2.

The Majority isn't always right. Because the Israelites didn't believe God could have given them the land they had to wander for 40 years living on manna until a new generation had arisen. They had to be super humbled.

Like the Israelites, we need to be reminded of what God has done for us. We need to be reminded that it is only through God's power and intervention that we will be able to see our Promised Land. We need to be reminded that when we listen to the Majority report that says we cannot do something, or we have decided not to do what God calls us to do that we will BE humbled, maybe even ... super humbled.

Actor Marlon Brando once observed, "The greatest love affairs I have ever witnessed took place with one actor, unassisted."

Today, there's a whole lot of humbling going on. They aren't humbling themselves. They are being humbled because they are being exposed

In Jesus' day, a hypocrite was the technical term for an actor. An actor is someone who plays a role, who acts in a way that is not really him or her. Actors are professional hypocrites--You know, those who say, "I may not be a doctor, but I play one on TV."

The political religious leaders that had been testing Jesus valued appearances over authenticity. In other words, looking good was more important than being or doing good.

Jesus said of these opponents, "Everything they do is done for others to see. Notice also how long the tassels on their cloaks are! A fierce competition developed over who wore the longest tassels.

On Wednesday I went to Target and walking in the store in front of me was an obviously Jewish man. He was obvious because he had a small black velvet cap that only covered the back of his head and he had tassels hanging below the bottom of his black suit coat on an 80 degree Wednesday at noon. The tassels were attached to his prayer shawl that he wore under his suit coat.

Jesus said, "Look at the straps with scripture verses on them which they wear on their foreheads and arms and notice how large they are." The straps that Orthodox Jews wear are called phylacteries. The Pharisees, following the directions laid down in Deuteronomy 11:18. It said, "You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and fix them as an emblem on your forehead."

They took that verse literally and they actually wrote scripture on small pieces of parchment and put them in little leather boxes on their wrists and foreheads. Eventually, some of them began wearing larger and larger phylacteries, as if to show that they were even more religious than their colleagues.

Today we live in what is arguably the most appearance-conscious nation on earth. Selfie Nation if not Selfie World. From a young age, we are bombarded by societal messages telling us that appearance is more important than substance. There was a story on 20/20 children taking growth hormones to grow taller because their self esteem was stymied by how short they were.

That's what bothered Jesus about these religious teachers. He reminded them that righteousness isn't about appearances, it's about actions.

Secondly, these leaders valued rules over relationships. They were caught up in following the rules. As we noted last week, Jesus was passionate about establishing relationships. Jesus taught that what was important was loving God and loving one's neighbor. He's trying to say to anyone else who will listen, "Faith's about more than rules; it's about relationships. It's about loving God passionately and loving others compassionately. (1)

I read that a person once happened on the great comedic actor W.C. Fields who was caught in the act of reading his Bible in his Dressing Room. Quick witted as he was, Mr. Fields response was, "Looking for loopholes."

These lawyers Jesus was blasting had piled up laws for the people to follow, but were experts at creating loopholes for themselves. They created heavy burdens for others but wouldn't lift a finger to help them carry those loads or let them in on the loopholes. Corban was a law they created that gave them a pass from taking care of their parents. They could give money to the temple, which came back to them, and declare it "corban" meaning they wouldn't have money to support their parents. They used the "I gave at the office" excuse to get out of caring for their parents in their old age.

Finally, these leaders valued respectability over righteousness. They loved the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they loved to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them "Teacher." Pride and position were more important than sacrifice and service. The most important thing became what other people thought.

"Respectable" members of society got nervous when Jesus entered the room. He didn't play by their rules. Jesus didn't wear fancy robes with long tassels. He hung out with outcasts and sinners, not with the movers and shakers. Instead of expecting the place of honor at banquets, Jesus stooped to wash his disciples' feet. As Mike Wilson said in his daily note last Wednesday, "Never look down on someone unless you are helping them up."

Stewardship is about so much more than how we spend our money. It's about how we spend our lives.

John Bedingfield writes, "We are what gets in the way of looking at stewardship as stewardship. We are what gets in the way of going from an "annual beg-a-thon" campaign to a year-round lifestyle of giving back to God from what God has entrusted to us. We need to begin to look at global warming as a stewardship issue. The lack of recycling that clogs landfills and creates additional pollution is a stewardship issue. Hoarding food, water and money while other people have none is absolutely the kind of stewardship issue we hear about from Jesus. He said, "If you do these things for the least of my children, you do them for me." We are called to be means that the stewards of the planet – all of us – are charged with caring for all the other stewards." (2)

Stewardship is an attitude that reflects how grateful we are to God by the tithes and offerings and pledges we dedicate to God's work... But it ALSO is about how we do our part in fulfilling our Great Commission of making disciples of all nationalities. It is ALSO about obeying our Great Commandment of loving the Lord with all our heart and soul and mind and strength and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

This morning, in addition to remembering what Jesus did for us through our celebrating the sacrament of Holy Communion, we will have the opportunity to pledge to do both of those as we dedicate ourselves and bring our pledges for 2018 forward.

When civil rights matriarch Rosa Parks died, she became one of only 30 Americans ever honored with the pomp and ritual of a Capitol Rotunda viewing. The tribute required an act of Congress. It was the first time a private citizen renowned for social activism, and the first time a woman was the focus of the ritual.

The first person so honored was Henry Clay, in 1852. The last person before Rosa was President Ronald Reagan. In between, there were nine presidents, eight members of Congress, an admiral, two generals, two government officials, two Capitol police officers slain at their posts, unknown soldiers, Pierre Charles L'Enfant, the architect who designed Washington, D.C.....and a seamstress.

A humble seamstress who quietly refused to give up her bus seat to a white man in Montgomery, Alabama over half-century ago was the first woman and the second African American to lie at the same exalted place as presidents and war heroes. She was ... super humble.

Jesus said, "Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." He said, "The greatest among you will be your servant." In the 20<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew the 28 verse Matthew described Jesus' attitude throughout his life, his mission in life which should be ours as well. He wrote, "He came not to be served...but to serve."

Let's Pray.

Great God, you have warned us against the sin of hypocrisy and the pride that spawns it. Sow humility in our hearts: that, knowing our proper place relative to your majesty, we may be effective agents of your will and compassionate sisters and brothers of our neighbors. You are witness, O God, to the work we do for the sake of the gospel. Help us to raise the needs of others above those of our own, and to be more faithful in our commitment and faith. Make us ever bolder in our love for neighbors and use us to lead others to the truth.

We pray for those on our hearts who need your guidance, your healing, and your provision. We pray for Clarence Shepherd and Ann Williams as they recover from their hospitalization. We pray for those still recovering from flood waters and wild fires flames. We thank you for all the saints who rest from their labors on earth. We are grateful for the great cloud of witnesses whose faith paved the way for us and pray that we may continue to blaze trails for those who follow us.

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1. Contributed by Michele Miller, Reader's Digest, Nov. 88, p. 16.
  2. John Bedingfield, Stewards of the Planet

A little boy attended Church with his Grandfather one Sunday. Grandpa's church had beautiful stained-glass windows. Grandpa told his grandson that the windows contained pictures of Saint Matthew, Saint Mark, and Saint Luke, Saint John, Saint Paul, and whole lot of other saints.

When he got home, the boy told Mom and Dad all about it. Dad, wanting to be funny and curious about what his son had learned, asked, "*What is a saint?*" The boy thought for a minute and then replied, "*A saint is a somebody the light shines through.*"

Last Sunday in my pastoral prayer we took time to lift the names of those who joined the Church Triumphant since our last All Saints Day. It was not as elaborate an honor as a Capitol Rotunda observance but still it was a way of giving thanks for those who have become lost to us for now. We will conclude our service today by singing "For All the Saints who from their labors rest...in their honor.