

**The 21<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Pentecost: Holy Trinity Church: November 5, 2017**

**Proper 26: Matthew 23: 1-12: *Humility is the Cure for Hypocrisy***

**Preached**

**By**

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**In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen**

**The politicians in Washington play the gotcha game to perfection. To make matters worse the news media feeds on it. Not only do they feed on it, they feed it, hoping for a national scandal to make themselves appear relevant.**

**These various political events are a fitting context for our scriptural reading from Matthew's Gospel today because it is all about hypocrisy.**

**Listen to what Jesus says about these politicians in his day. They were called Pharisees: *"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."* Now what did Jesus mean? Simply this: The Pharisees made laws. They demanded that the common person follow those laws. But they themselves found ways to get around those laws. They were not willing to**

carry the heavy loads they demanded everyone else to carry. In a word: Hypocrisy. In Washington, the standards that the Democrats set for the Republicans, they themselves are not willing to live by. And the standards that the Republicans set for the Democrats, they themselves are not willing to live by. Why? Because if you let down your guard for one moment and admit that you are wrong, your political opponents will seize the moment and go in for the kill.

My sisters and brothers, if there was ever a time Washington needed a prophet; it is surely now. Washington needs a prophet like that, to step up and expose the abuse, the hypocrisy and the buffoonery. Jesus was that prophet in his day. He demanded honest leadership. Jesus was saying that leaders must guard against hypocrisy and aim toward humility. Leaders must set aside greatness and strive for servant hood. Leaders must wait for honor and act now out of duty. Leadership, the way Jesus described it, is hard to find, even among the religious. It is difficult to find because hypocrisy keeps most leaders from being effective leaders.

So, it begs the question, what is it that keeps most leaders from being effective leaders? I believe it is hypocrisy. It can quickly undermine the work of the greatest teachers. What is hypocrisy? For great theological questions like this,

**I must defer to Charles Shultz, Charlie Brown and the gang, to illustrate hypocrisy in a Peanuts cartoon. Lucy is playing her role as psychiatrist. You know, she sits in her booth with the sign that reads: "Psychiatric Help - 5 cents." The sign below says, "The Doctor Is In." Lucy says to Charlie Brown, "Your life is like a house." In the next frame, she says reflectively, "You want your house to have a solid foundation, don't you?" Charlie Brown has a kind of blank look on his face. Lucy says, "Of course you do." Charlie Brown is still silent saying nothing. Then in the fourth frame, psychiatrist Lucy says, "So don't build your house on the sand, Charlie Brown." About that time, a huge wind gust comes up and blows the booth down. Lucy, sitting in the rubble says, "Or use cheap nails."**

**Jesus reminds the Pharisees and Scribes, leaders of the people, that they must practice what they preach. It is not enough to have the right doctrine. It is not enough to know all the laws. It is not enough to correctly teach people the rules. Leaders must live by the advice they give. If you tell people to build a home on a solid foundation but then use cheap nails in the construction of your own home, then you are a hypocrite. General Eisenhower used to demonstrate the art of leadership with a piece of string. He would put the string on a table and say: "PULL it and it will follow wherever you wish.**

**PUSH it and it will go nowhere at all. It's just that way when it comes to leading people. They need to follow a person who is leading by example."**

**It is so easy to fall into the trap of outer significance. No sooner do we acquire a little power than we are trying to display it with letters after our name, or through the clothes on our back, or by titles on the door. Someone once wrote Ann Landers a letter asking if a person who receives an honorary doctoral degree should use it publicly. She said, 'yes.' He or she should make it known and put the title before their name. Everyone should be expected to call him or her Doctor. All the rights and privileges therein should be enjoined. He or she should frame the degree and put it on the wall. And at the end of the day put it in a drawer and never take it out again. My brothers and sisters,**

**It is ok to be called teacher if you are a teacher in deed.**

**It is ok to be called father if you are a father in deed.**

**It is ok to be called doctor if you are a doctor in deed**

**It is ok to be called mother if you are a mother in deed.**

**For, it is not the title, but the deed that makes it so.**

**The solution to the hypocrisy problem is humility.**

**My sisters and brothers, think about the things that humble you. There are many things that humble me. I am humbled in the presence of the starry firmament. I am humbled with the beauty of God's creation in flight. I am humbled in the presence of a skilled musician. I am humbled by an act of love that seeks nothing in return. I am humbled at the birth of a newborn baby. I am humbled by the knowledge of a great teacher. I am humbled by the simple wisdom of a small child. What is humility? A dictionary will tell you it means: Not proud or arrogant, low in rank, or importance, or position. That's a good definition. And I can think of no greater example than when the Lord of the universe, on the night he took the bread and broke it, took a servant's apron, tied it upon his waste, knelt before the disciples and washed their feet. That was the incarnation of full humility. And so let me caution you that humility does not negate critical thought or moral clarity. Christ called the actions of Judas that evening an act of betrayal. He did not allow treachery to go unnoticed.**

**It was 1981. I was in my second year in the School of Theology at St. John's Seminary in Brighton, Massachusetts. It was Holy Thursday and I was chosen to serve as assistant Master of Ceremonies to the Secretary and Master of Ceremonies to the Cardinal Archbishop of Boston, Humberto Medeiros. The liturgy would take place in the seminary chapel and the public was invited. I**

was honored to be selected for this because I admired the cardinal so much. He would often show up in the refectory after evening prayers and join the faculty and seminarians for supper. When he would sit with us, he would ask us questions. He was interested in who we were and where we came from. He was soft spoken, highly intelligent and a very warm person. He loved a good joke and he loved to laugh. What I loved about him the most was his great and very genuine humility. Born and brought up in Fall River Massachusetts to poor Portuguese immigrant parents, he worked in the mills of Fall River sweeping floors. He would often say, "I am but a worm." We would often laugh nervously when he said that to us because we didn't take him seriously. We would say to each to each other, "He got it all wrong. We are the worms not him." He loved to laugh and joke, but he never forgot who he was and where he came from. There he was all decked out in red, with mitre, crozier and ring, a prince of the Roman Catholic Church, but possessing the humble spirit of a foot washing Jesus Christ. He was the leader of one the largest diocese's in the United States. He lived in a palace on the seminary grounds overlooking Commonwealth Avenue. What he never forgot was that His God was a humble servant.

On Holy Thursday night, the cardinal's Master of Ceremonies told me to go into the ante-room where the Cardinal was waiting and, just introduce

**yourself. As soon as I walked in, his face lit up with a big smile and he reached out and grabbed both my hands in his and held onto them. He said, “My son you and I are both worms so you will crawl with me on the floor as I wash feet. I will wash your feet first. Then, you will get on the floor, on all fours, and hand me the towels and water. Do not get on your feet until we are finished. You will wash my feet last. We will crawl from one disciple to the other.” The cardinal took off all his vestments and then did just that. He washed and dried the feet of 12 disciples and then kissed the foot of each one. I was deeply touched by his humility and his great warmth and kindness to each person whom he considered to be Jesus Christ. As I crawled next to him on all fours, just inches from his face, after he washed and dried the feet of each person, he would look up into their eyes and without a word spoken he just smiled as if he was looking into the face of God and then he would kiss their feet. You know, I truly believe that a smile is the one physical human characteristic that we share with God. In my eyes his Eminence was truly a prince of Jesus Christ’s church because of his humility.**

**My sisters and brothers, Christians are not supposed to be judgmental; rather, we are to judge rightly. Jesus is our example. When he dealt with the Pharisees and Scribes in Matthew 23 he called them: hardhearted, hypocrites, blind guides, fools, self-indulgent, full of greed, whitewashed tombs, lawless, a**

**brood of vipers, descendents of murderers. It seems to me that Christians have shied away from judgment of wrong doers NOT because we are trying to be holy and compassionate but because we are afraid of confrontation and God forbid we commit the mortal sin of political incorrectness. The church, as a community, which assesses truth, must judge individual's behavior. You might say, well Fr. John, that's all right for Jesus but not for us. I would make you aware that when Jesus said these things he not only addressed the religious leaders he also addressed the crowds and his own disciples. They were to cast a critical eye toward their leaders. Judging rightly, with humility, is the duty of every Christian.**

**Now, how can this be done? The greatest trap of religion is this: Moral arrogance, to assume that I am more righteous before God than the next person. Jesus pointed out that the religious leaders had made rules impossible to follow, they broadened their religious clothing to bring attention to themselves, they sought out the seats of honor in the synagogue, and walked in the market places just to be seen by the people. The Pharisees and Scribes had become arrogant and self-righteous. So, what is Jesus' solution to the long standing history of religious abuses? Here it is. He turns to his disciples and he says, "They love to be honored and in the streets and to have people call them rabbi, but you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and all of**

**you are students. Nor are you to be called instructor, for you have one instructor, the Messiah.” And then he says this: The greatest among you will be your servant.**

**My sisters and brothers in Christ, here is our challenge. Jesus levels the playing field. Jesus is telling us that in the Kingdom of God leadership is marked by servanthood. If you want to rid your life of hypocrisy, find a place to serve. If you want to rid your church of hypocrisy, find a place to serve. If you want to rid the nation of hypocrisy, find a place to serve. Why should we serve? Because, a servant’s word and actions will carry far more weight in the end than the word of a great teacher who does not follow through.**

**The American Poet Edgar A. Guest wrote:**

**I'd rather see a sermon than hear one, any day;**

**I'd rather one should walk with me than merely show the way;**

**The eye's a better pupil and more willing than the ear.**

**Fine counsel is confusing, but examples always clear,**

**And the best of all preachers are those, who live their creeds,**

**For to see good put in action is what everybody need. Amen.**