

**Matthew 23:1-12**

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.”

The greatest among you will be your servant. It is all saints Sunday, and a good day for us to remember those saints from the church and from our own lives who have set an example for us in the ways that they have humbled themselves and served God.

Let's start this morning with a saint listed in the Hebrews 11 faith hall of fame; a saint named Joshua who lived well over 3000 years ago. His name literally means, Yahweh is salvation. It is a great name. The name, Jesus, is a Greek translation of Joshua. So, that's a pretty impressive start. You're no doubt familiar with some of Joshua's story. 40 years prior to our passage, Joshua had been chosen to represent his tribe as one of the 12 spies sent into Canaan to spy out the land before the conquest. You may remember that when the spies returned to Moses and the people, they all reported that the land was filled with milk and honey. But, of

the 12, only Joshua and Caleb believed and reported that if they trusted God, God could give them the victory. Unfortunately, the Hebrew people listened to the other 10 spies and so that entire generation did not get to enter the land.

In Joshua 1:1-2, we read that Joshua has been hand-picked by God to lead the people of Israel after the death of Moses. At that time, God encouraged Joshua to be strong and courageous and to trust in Him.

You may also have come across a famous saying of Joshua. A quick amazon search of this phrase led me to all kinds of wall hangings and door mats for my home. Do you know the phrase?

As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.

Well, that comes later in Joshua's story. In our passage from Joshua 3, we find Joshua and the Hebrew people massed on the eastern side of the Jordan river. I'm sure Joshua was like us in that he had clay feet and surely failed many times, but God had also seen Joshua's faithfulness. Here at the river, we read that God spoke to Joshua, just as he had met with Moses and had spoken to Moses on numerous occasions. I will openly admit that I am very curious as to what that would have looked like. Anyways, God told 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." We read that the priests were told to carry the ark of the covenant

into the waters. Remember: The ark was a symbol of God's presence with them. It carried the 10 commandments. It was a sign of God's authority. It had been a sign that God was with Moses as he led the people, and it was a sign that He was now with Joshua. This was a big deal. As the priests stepped out into the water with the ark, we read that the waters of the Jordan stopped flowing and the people were able to walk across on dry ground.

In this instance and story, we have the story of a leader, faithful to God, who took on the mantle and the authority of Moses and continued to serve God faithfully.

Now, let's fast forward over a thousand years to our Gospel reading. Moses and Joshua are distant and revered ancestors of the people and of faith in Yahweh. The religion of Judaism and the people of Yahweh were a little fractured during the New Testament days, but certainly not nearly as fractured as Christians are today. The people of Israel had endured all sorts of calamities in their 1000 plus year history. The Northern kingdom, Israel, had been defeated by the Assyrians in 722 BC. The Southern kingdom, Judah, had fallen to Babylon in 586 BC. Jewish people were dispersed all over the Ancient Near East.

When Cyrus of Persia allowed them to return to the land, something very interesting occurred. The authors of the historical books of the Kings and Chronicles had been pretty clear in their analysis that the reason that Israel had

been defeated by their enemies is because they had been unfaithful to God and God's commands. And we read in books like Ezra and Nehemiah that there was deep concern that with this new start, they must stay true to God so that God would not bring disaster on them once again.

We can see a hardening legalism developing in those books. Groups like the Hasideans, or 'Pious ones' had developed by at least the second century BC. Oral traditions and laws began to emerge, and I think that we could agree that the intention was right. They put a fence around the law. The extra laws and traditions would keep them from coming at all close to breaking Torah.

I try to explain it to students like this:

The temptation to buy alcohol at IGA.

One suggestion of what happened to the Hasideans is that they were precursors to the Pharisees and perhaps also the Essenes of Jesus' day. And it is the Pharisees that we find as the recipients of a pretty harsh critique by Jesus in our Gospel reading, but honestly, I think it is fair to try to be objective with them. I think that in many ways, they were trying hard to do what they thought was right. Sometimes when they left Jesus, they did so amazed at his teaching, and there were some, like Nicodemus and Josephus who were very interested in the ministry and teaching of Jesus. Paul had been trained as a Pharisee by the famous rabbi, Gamaleal, and though he was obviously wrong in persecuting Christians, he was

certainly zealous about what he believed. The Pharisees were interested in how to apply and interpret the Mosaic law. They accepted the Prophets, Writings and doctrines such as the Oral Torah ... the oral laws given to fence the Torah, and also believed in the resurrection of the dead.

Pharisees surely believed that they were trying to stem the tide that was ebbing away from what they considered to be the faithful worship of Yahweh. They also resisted Hellenization and compromise with the Romans.

So, here, I think is the problem that Jesus had with the Pharisees, and perhaps something that we should think about in our own lives as well. I want to make a connection here that I think the lectionary folks were trying to make. There was a clear sign of God's presence and the idea of mantle of Moses with Joshua and the connection with the ark.

In Matthew 23, Jesus notes that the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat. I had to look this up, but it is as you might expect. Pharisees claimed [Mosaic](#) authority for their interpretation of [Jewish religious law](#). The seat of Moses is where the authoritative teachers sat, and to sit in someone's seat normally meant that they succeeded that person. So, the implication is that these teachers of the law believed that they were Moses' legal successors possessing all his authority

Commentator D.A. Carson notes that verses 2-4 are set up as a chiasm that is filled with biting irony. He believes that Jesus is using sarcasm here when he notes

that they have taken on the authority of Moses, so we should do what they say.

Carson notes that Jesus was critical of the Pharisees throughout Matthew's gospel.

The context of our passage is the days before Passover. We see in chapter 21 that Jesus has entered Jerusalem triumphally. He has cleansed the temple. This is holy week. These are the last few days leading up to the crucifixion. In Matthew's gospel, we have a number of clashes between Jesus and the religious leaders. The cleansing of the temple, is probably most telling here. In chapter 21, Jesus drove out those who were selling and buying and the money changers. He claimed that they had turned the temple into a den of robbers. In Mark's gospel, we read that this was a catalyst and that after the cleansing the religious authorities began to look for a way to kill Jesus.

Again, see the escalating context - later in chapter 21, he enters the temple and the chief priests and elders questioned his authority. Then again, he tells the parable of the wicked tenants and the chief priests and the Pharisees realized that Jesus is criticizing them and wanted to arrest him, but feared the crowds.

In chapter 22, we read that the Pharisees went and sought to trap Jesus with the question about paying taxes. But his answer about giving to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God amazed them.

We have just about constant conflict recorded here. Next, the Saducees came and tried to trap him with a question about the resurrection ... and we read that his

answer astounded the crowd. The story of the greatest commandment and also Jesus asking the Pharisees what they think of the Messiah immediately precede our passage as well.

What is Jesus' concern? I think it is that his disciples and followers understand that in the politics of God's upside down kingdom, the goal is humble ourselves and to serve others, not to look impressive or think that or act like we have all the right answers.

I like to read. I like to think and wrestle with ideas, though to be honest, I often like to read books that affirm ideas I already am attracted to. Very recently, I was given two books. These two books I received are theologically polar opposites. As I've begun reading, I've tended to agree with one, while despising the other well past the point of being fair ... as if I know all the things and don't ever need to get my views challenged

I can get too judgey, like the Pharisees. I can get caught up in being the morals police on both sides of all sorts of issues, like I know all the answers and should be sitting in the seat of Moses with all the answers. I'm sure that's not true of any of the rest of you. This passage invites us to add a little humble pie in our diets and focus on finding ways to serve God and others.

If we in some way think that we should be taking on the mantle of Moses, or as Christians see ourselves as the heirs of Moses, then we ought to be thinking of

ways to serve. Moses was not perfect, but he served the people and even interceded for them when God was frustrated with them.

This is just like those imperfect saints of old whose stories are so diverse and yet who have inspired us by their love for God and others. There are the ancient saints like Perpetua and Felicity, or Cyril and Francis from so long ago and there are modern saints like Jim Reinhart, Frank Thompson and Elva McCallister who have loved and served others in our time and context.

Application of these ideas will no doubt look different for each of us in the contexts in which we live our lives and with the passions that God has put on our hearts. Maybe our role is interceding in prayer and working for peace in the many the situations of war and tragedy in so many places. Maybe it is serving people with various physical or spiritual needs and those struggling in our community as Paul did in Thessalonica. Maybe it is meeting and building real relationships with neighbors.

I don't know what exactly what God might be putting on your heart or calling you to in your world, and we certainly can't do all the things, but I do invite each of us to remember Jesus' word to his first followers that the greatest amongst them will be a servant. May we find ways to follow him faithfully.