

Sermon: "A Call for Humility"

Scripture Lessons: Joshua 3:7-17, Matthew 23:1-12

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Our first scripture reading on this All Saints' weekend is Joshua 3:7-17. The Book of Joshua begins with another miraculous parting of the sea as the Israelites cross the Jordan River into the Promised Land. They cross over without Moses, however they have the law to guide them and the Ark of the Covenant to accompany them, symbolizing God's presence. The Hebrew writers emphasize that this event occurs during the rainy, Spring harvest to bring home the miraculous nature of the crossing and the God with whom all things are possible. The God who created humanity from the dust of the earth and breathed life into them, the God who formed the Israelite people like a Potter molds the clay will make a way where there is no way. By the grace of God goes each one of us. Hear now God's Holy Word.

*7 The Lord said to 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. 8 You are the one who shall command the priests who bear the ark of the covenant, "When you come to the edge of the waters of the Jordan, you shall stand still in the Jordan." 9 Joshua then said to the Israelites, "Draw near and hear the words of the Lord your God." 10 Joshua said, "By this you shall know that among you is the living God who without fail will drive out from before you the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites, and Jebusites: 11 the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is going to pass before you into the Jordan. 12 So now select twelve men from the tribes of Israel, one from each tribe. 13 When the soles of the feet of the priests who bear the ark of the Lord, the Lord of all the earth, rest in the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan flowing from above shall be cut off; they shall stand in a single heap." 14 When the people set out from their tents to cross over the Jordan, the priests bearing the ark of the covenant were in front of the people. 15 Now the Jordan overflows all its banks throughout the time of harvest. So when those who bore the ark had come to the Jordan, and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the edge of the water, 16 the waters flowing from above stood still, rising up in a single heap far off at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan, while those flowing toward the sea of the Arabah, the Dead Sea, were wholly cut off. Then the people crossed over opposite Jericho. 17 While all Israel were crossing over on dry ground, the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the Lord stood on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan, until the entire nation finished crossing over the Jordan.*

Our second scripture reading is Matthew 23:1-12. Jesus, who was baptized in the Jordan River which the Israelites crossed several hundred years earlier, is disturbed by the scribes and Pharisees who are teachers and interpreters of the law in the line of Moses. What troubles Jesus about these religious leaders is not the law "which he came to fulfill" rather he cannot abide with their vanity, hypocrisy and arrogance...traits that are always distasteful, and particularly when characteristics of religious people and their leaders. Listen now for the Word of God.

*Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, 2 "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; 3 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 5 They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. 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. 8 But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. 9 And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. 10 Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. 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. Amen.*

The sermon title: "A Call for Humility"

*The Text: All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted. Matthew 23:12*

Let us pray: Holy and Loving God, as we reflect on Jesus' call for humility, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

On this All Saints' Weekend, we gather as a faith community to affirm the "priesthood of all believers," one of the major tenants of the Protestant Reformation. What began with Martin Luther posting 95 theses or "protests" on the door of the Wittenberg Church that "Hallowed Eve" of All Saints' Day, October 31, 1517 culminated in John Calvin's theological affirmation that all God's children are "priests" or "saints," equally called to lead within the church through the manner in which we live our lives. All Saints' Remembrance Sunday provides an opportunity for Westminster to honor the memory of members who have died in the past year. Our Memorial Garden affirms the church's ongoing relationship with those who have gone before us. Along with those whom we honor (this weekend) today, many of us are also remembering our own loved ones who have "crossed over." For the Kieffer family one of those special "saints" we remember this weekend is Peter's brother, William Tolbert Kieffer, III who had an untimely death in 2010, at the age of 52, from an aortic dissection.

One cannot talk about Bill Kieffer without talking about tennis. Bill was the Tennis Champion of Essex, Connecticut when he was thirteen, outplaying every man, woman and child in the town tournament. This past summer we visited the court where Bill accomplished this feat. Bill loved tennis and was a strong and smart tennis player. A level four player at the time of his death, it was a joy to watch Bill play the game.

Peter's Uncle Dick, an avid tennis player himself, recently sent Peter one of his favorite books *Levels of the Game* by John McPhee, in honor of Bill. This is a narrative of a tennis match played by Arthur Ashe and Clark Graebner at Forest Hills in the 1968 U.S. Open, beginning with the ball rising into the air for the initial serve and ending with the final point. McPhee provides a brilliant, stroke-by-stroke description of the game, while examining the background, attitude and character of each player.

Arthur Ashe won the match against Graebner that day and then triumphed over Tom Okker of the Netherlands, winning the 1968 U.S. Open. The next year, even though he was rated the number one U.S. tennis player, as a person of color he was denied a visa to compete in the South African Open because of the Apartheid policy. In 1970 he won the Australian Open and in 1975 he brought home the Wimbledon Trophy, outplaying Jimmy Connors from Belleville, Illinois.

Despite his amazing athleticism, Arthur had a heart condition which required two heart surgeries in his late 30's and early 40's. Tragically he contracted AIDS from a blood transfusion during his second surgery and became a spokesperson for AIDS victims during an uncertain and frightening time for himself, his wife, his daughter (who was only 4 when he died), and countless others.

This year marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Civil Rights Act which outlaws discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. By signing this bill, President Johnson guaranteed the civil rights for all Americans. However, in the same way that the Israelites had many battles to fight once they crossed the Jordan to make the Promised Land their own, Americans have fought battles on many fronts in these fifty years as we continue to realize the promises within this act.

Besides being a disciplined and gifted tennis player, Arthur was an advocate for social justice and a participant in the Civil Rights Movement in his own unpretentious way. In a game that is often known for short tempered and arrogant players, Arthur Ashe was refreshingly humble. He knew who he was, he understood what he was capable of, and he respected his opponent. The humility and confidence he had on the court was evident in the way he lived his life off the court.

Humility is a characteristic that is not held in high esteem in our culture. The dictionary defines humility as being modest and respectful, lacking pretense, not believing that one is superior to others. The Latin word for *humility* is very close to the Latin word for *humanity* and means to be *grounded, from the earth, low*. Humility affirms one's intrinsic self-worth as a child of God, formed from the earth by the Potter into a human being. Humility accepts the limitations that are a part of being human, and understands that when these limitations are respected, they have the ability to expand one's horizon.

Some mistakenly interpret humility as a lack of self-confidence or timidity. In reality, the person who is humble has a strong sense of self in relation to others and to God. A humble person understands he or she is not the center of the universe...but a small part of the whole created by a loving and reliable God, with a particular calling or vocation. It is because of a strong self-worth that a person is able to be humble, to respect, honor, and even submit oneself to others.

Bruna Martinuzzi has written a thoughtful book on the importance of humility in leadership. It is called *The Leader as a Mensch: Become the Kind of Person Others Want to Follow*. (Mensch is a Yiddish word for "person with integrity.") She observes that companies with humble and determined leaders are more successful. Humble leaders direct their ego away from themselves to the larger goal and continually recognize the contributions of others.

Humility is about having confidence without arrogance! It is the antithesis of *hubris*, that excessive, arrogant pride which often leads to a person's demise. Humility is about a quiet confidence without the need for a selling of one's wares. It's about being content to let others discover the layers of one's talents without having to boast about them. It's a lack of arrogance, not a lack of assertiveness in the pursuit of achievement.

Another mark of a leader who practices humility is his or her treatment of others. Such leaders treat everyone with respect regardless of position. Something interesting happens, too, when one approaches problem solving from a perspective of humility: it opens us up to possibilities. As we choose open-mindedness and curiosity over protecting our point of view, we create the kind of community Jesus encouraged in his followers. We are willing to learn from what others have to offer.

My friends, our teacher and our Savior, the one who is our All and All and who joined us in our humanity calls for humility among the priesthood of all believers, among the saints of the church, those gathered in this (room) sanctuary and those who have gone before us. Christ's call for humility is emphatic and enthusiastic ...perhaps because he knew from his own experience how destructive arrogance among religious leaders could be.

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, let us respond to the call for humility, let us embrace our humanity, respect our limitations, honor our brothers and sisters, and let us never forget: *All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.* Amen.