Sermon Text – Sunday, November 1, 2026 – Pastor Paula Kraus

1st Reading: 1 John 2:28-3:5; 2nd Reading: 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13
Scripture for Message: Matthew 23:1-12 "Leadership"

The saints we honor and remember on All Saint's Day are examples we seek to mimic. In some cases, they were leaders among us, examples of faith and in some cases their leadership and faithfulness are what led us to salvation. Jesus, in this scripture, gives us the qualities of both good and bad leadership. That is something we should explore on a Sunday, two days before a general election – what qualities are we looking for in our leaders?

We can gather from what Jesus says about the scribes and Pharisees that they are good teachers; he says what they teach we should follow. He says that they are not, however, good leaders – Jesus tells the crowds and his disciples "do not do as they do." Jesus gives the scribes and Pharisees their creds. In Matthew's time, they were not hypocrites interested only in external signs of piety. However, they were, with the loss of the Temple after the disastrous war with Rome around the year 70, concerned with the loss of their identity and what that loss of power and status would mean for them. Their attempts to hold on to their identities created the illusion of hierarchy – that they were better than or more important than others.

The scribes and Pharisees, according to Jesus' statement, had religious authority – they discern the way toward life based on the explanation of the Torah, which is the same basis Jesus used. The conduct of the scribes and Pharisees, however, was not consistent with the values and loyalties they proclaim. Their talk and their walk were not coordinated. Why is that a problem?

Jesus tells the crowds, in verse four, "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." The Pharisees gave instructions in the law, but their strict judgment was without mercy or compassion. Recall when Jesus taught the disciples in what we call the "Sermon on the Mount" he says that he has come to 'fulfill' the law. His explanations of the law, i.e., murder, adultery, oaths, etc. shift the focus from behavior to attitudes of the heart. It seems the Pharisees focused more on consistency of right behavior than on the conditions of the heart that would make

right behavior less burdensome on the common folk or those in the crowds with Jesus.

The scribes and Pharisees who set themselves above and apart create exclusion and division – when God desires unity of God's people. Jesus describes these scribes and Pharisees as legalistic and inflexible. "While claiming to honor God, certain persons are really seeking the admiration of others by claiming marks of high social status."[1] Their desire to be seen and recognized was greater than their desire to do what was best for others. Jesus illustrates people whose love of self is greater than love of neighbor. That is the problem. Both Jesus and Matthew want a person's religious actions to be aimed at gaining the approval of God alone.

So, Jesus tells his disciples, "You are not to be called rabbi, nor are you to be called instructors." In contrast to what the Pharisees do, the disciples are to be servants for they have one teacher and they are students, they have one instructor – the Messiah. He reminds them that, "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted." Jesus is not, at this point, intending to reform the Pharisees rather he wants his disciples to exhibit a different type of leadership. Therefore, he gives the instructions, do not do as they do.

Jesus led them by example, showing what it was like to be a servant leader – "The greatest among you will be your servant." Jesus himself wore fringed robes, confirmed in Matthew 9:20, but did not wear them to bring attention to himself. Jesus exhibited the ultimate example of servanthood as he obediently went to the cross and suffered humiliation to defeat death once for all. Jesus' examples to his disciples and the others he taught are examples of Christian living to us as well.

It is not a "mortal" sin for clergy to be addressed as "Reverand" "Father" "Doctor" or "Pastor" these are terms that honor the calling and the education of religious leaders. The problem begins when these "titles" allow the person to be placed on a pedestal and revered above others in the congregation. Jesus' statement "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted" is relevant even in modern times. Jesus is talking about servant leadership, the exact leadership he himself exhibited. The challenge for religious leaders is that,

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[1] Gregory Anderson Love. "Matthew 23:1-12: Theological Perspective" *Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew, Vol. 2 Chapters 14-28.* eds. Jarvis and Johnson. WJK. 2013. Print. pp.212-216

in spite of the title given them, they remain diligent in breaking down the barriers that come between clergy and lay-people.

The same challenge exists in the secular world – in spite of the title given a person – a true leader must be more focused on the role than the title. What are the qualities and signs that mark a person as a true and faithful leader? What are the signs that mark a person as a citizen of God's inbreaking kingdom? What are we looking for in our leaders today?

I am guessing that many in this building this morning would say that they want a leader who is a Christian. That's honorable – however, we know that a person can claim to be Christian and not follow the way of Jesus. We look for strength and power in our leaders, but those traits might come with ruthlessness and at times cruelty. It seems to me that citizens of God's kingdom are identified by their love, mercy, forgiveness, and servant leadership. We want our leaders to both talk the talk and walk the walk.

Admittedly, it is difficult to know whether our leaders practice what they teach because we are all flawed human beings who are sometimes thrust into roles of leadership and power. Sometimes the reasons people seek leadership roles become perverted and corrupted when they are given power – the need for recognition is inherent in all of us. The pull of power sometimes becomes greater than the desire to truly lead.

Everyone wants to be noticed, to have value – that is human nature. The leaders of government, churches, etc. are just average people with average problems and short comings no one person is greater than any other – unless they try to exalt themselves or the public puts them on pedestals. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and we have seen that happen – scandals of government officials, church leaders, teachers, coaches, etc. How we love it when they are knocked off their pedestals.

So, what does all of this mean for the church and the people in it? What does it mean now at this crucial point in our democracy? Would we consider a person who exhibited the same qualities as Jesus a good leader today? I would want someone who leads with honesty, integrity, mercy, and compassion. Someone who loves justice – for all. These are important qualities for a leader both religions and secular. "Excellence in

character will always be a far greater indicator of true leadership than charisma or competency alone."[2]

Maybe then the message for us today, in this world, in this community under the circumstances of our lives at this moment in time is a warning from Jesus. A warning to live distinctly Christian lives, set apart from worldly ambitions, without setting ourselves above others. To show the world we are different without sounding like we think we are better than. I wonder if the answer is right here in front of us. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted. This is the message. To be distinctly Christian we must humble ourselves before the Lord and exalt only God. We are distinctly Christian as we imitate Jesus and put service of others before self.

There too is a clear message about who we choose as leaders, both religious and secular. Leadership matters, whole nations may rise or fall as a consequence of true or poor leadership. When we enter our polling places and consider on Tuesday who to choose at the voting booth, and I pray that each one of us present today exercises their right and responsibility to vote – think of Jesus warning and choose your leaders wisely.

[2] Sammy G. Alfaro. "Matthew 23:1-12: Connecting the Reading with Scripture" *Connections Year A, Vol. 3.* eds. Green, et.al. WJK. 2020. Print. pp.454-456