

Sermon for Nov. 1, 2020 by Pastor Hanberry for Trinity UCC (Ser20-42)

In the middle of this week, after reading and re-reading this text from Matthew 23, I changed the sermon title from "It's Hard to be Humble" to "Humbled by Our Gifts. All this has to do with the gist of what Jesus says in verses 11-12: **11-12** *"Do you want to stand out? Then step down. Be a servant. If you puff yourself up, you'll get the wind knocked out of you. But if you're content to simply be yourself, your life will count for plenty."*

In the context of our remembering the saints of our lives today, this statement by Jesus is very likely true of those we celebrate today...certainly true of the ones I shared with the children. On the flip side of this idea is the song by Mac Davis, an American country music singer, songwriter, and actor, who just died September 29. I loved his song, "It's Hard to be Humble..." The refrain goes like this: *Oh Lord it's hard to be humble when you're perfect in every way I can't wait to look in the mirror 'cause I get better lookin' each day To know me is to love me, I must be a hell of a man Oh Lord it's hard to be humble, but I'm doin' the best that I can..."*

Jesus is not talking about that kind of person. I love what Jesus says to us today, especially from the Message. The text is packed full of theological issues, intriguing ideas about how Jesus goes about teaching the disciples (and how he goes about teaching us); about how to live meaningful lives filled with gratitude and humility. There are also useful parallels from Jesus' day to our days and lives for Jesus speaks about that all too human phenomenon we call "hypocrisy," that "universal and human tendency...that exists in human beings between" what we say and what we do. That gap between our "professed creed and our actual practice." That gap between our struggling with our struggles, our fears, our anxieties.

Even in these times of Covid 19, and loss of jobs and over 225,000+ deaths and a nasty, anxiety-ridden presidential election before us, this scripture raises a truly important question, and that is: "What Do We Do with Our Gratitude?" I must confess that during parts of this week, I have to say,

"Pastor Gerry, get real...what gratitude?" But this is not the first time I have raised this question for our consideration. It is not the first time I have preached on this theme. Not the first time I've preached on a topic with which I struggle...Truthfully, right now I am really struggling with feeling grateful. But this text demands it. This question is not my own, it is the question my wife, Pat, raised for me some years ago in the context of a discussion about what folks who have no faith--atheists if you will--do with their gratitude. It's a wonderfully provocative and intriguing question, Pat. Thank you.

What do we do with our gratitude? How do our gifts and talents impact our lives? Today, we give thanks for all the saints of our lives...all those who have helped shape and mold our lives.

We don't need much imagination to see that the Pharisees had much for which they could be grateful. They were religious leaders. They already had power and prestige and positions of influence. Much more of all those things than the ordinary citizen of the times. But, as Jesus tells us so clearly, the Pharisees had this sort "ostentatious piety," this overrated sense of entitlement that must have served to cover up something else in their lives they did not want those ordinary folks to see.

Let's face it, my friends, it would be a rare thing indeed, for anyone of us here today to actually practice 100 percent of "all we say we believe or all we profess in our religious ritual." I know I don't. I'm not going to give a percentage estimate, but it's not 100 percent. One writer describes this human reality this way. He says, "this spiritual gap can lead to our ostentatious piety to cover the reality that we are not measuring up to our own professed standard.

We all know a pious person when we see one. We also think we know the hypocrite when we see one. But oh, how we ought to be careful about pointing the finger at others we would like to call hypocrite. For in this passage from Matthew, Jesus just might point a finger right back at us."Do you want to stand out?" Do you want to be noticed? To be special? To be

affirmed? What does Jesus tell us? Jesus says if you want to stand out, “then step down. Be a servant. “All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted. You see, this is exactly how we are to live with our gifts and talents and our gratitude.

I bet if you looked at those saints of pass days who you admire, you will find this trait, this character of humble servant in them. Not pious saints. You can’t be a saint and be pious. Saints don’t stand out, they step down and serve.

We can give thanks for all the saints because they don’t burden, they don’t make our load heavier, do they? Matthew described the Pharisees like this: “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. Those are not the saints of our lives.

In closing, let me say that what I think is really important is how we keep our balance in all this. Ultimately, it is our real spiritual friends who help keep us in balance. “Loving and caring people who will us good and not ill” and who hold us in their hearts of prayer and who hold us accountable when we want to stand out and to climb up on that pedestal so others will see our good works.

We give thanks for the community of saints, who love us and guide us and shape us and humble us into servants of a loving God, and who tell us the truth, in love, about our lives. That’s what Jesus did to the Pharisees and to the Disciples. That’s what Jesus does for us today. And we need to be humble in these days and share the truth in love. George Antonakos, in his sermon, Portrait of a Wise person, says: “What do you do when you are diametrically opposed to another person’s viewpoint? If you live in a world of chaos and you want to live in a community gathered in the peace of God, how do you get from one place to the other?” He says, “SUBMIT YOURSELF TO GOD...ADOPT GOD’S VALUES AS THE WISDOM FOR YOUR LIFE.” I would offer: Just like a common practice these days of washing our hands very often to ward away the

Coronavirus, then we get along with each other and we change our chaotic, arrogant lives to ones grounded in gentleness and peace...and yes, humility. We wash the arrogance and envy and greed and selfishness off or our lives...May that be the way it is in your lives and in mind this day. Amen.