

November 4, 2017: Twenty Second Sunday after Pentecost (Year A)  
All Saints Day  
Matthew 23:1-12: Saints We Have Known

The week before last I sat down with a few members of the family we have been taking up a love offering for. They had asked me to perform the funeral service for their mother, which I was honored to do, but I never met her so I asked them to tell me about her. They were very honest. That is not always the case.

One of the things they told me was that their mom had kind of a wild side, that she loved to do crazy and dangerous things. To support this statement, they told me that she loved to speed up and down the mean streets of Julian in her old Monte Carlo. But because she loved her children and grandchildren, she would try to discourage them from following her example. When her came to her risky behavior she would say to them, "Do as I say, not as I do."

I can appreciate her honesty. She knew at least in this regard she was not the best person to imitate. But many people won't admit that. Most people don't wear a sign around their neck that says "Don't be like me." So that leaves it up to us to know who we should follow. And it is so important that we make the right decision, especially when it comes to our faith. In the passage we read this morning, Jesus is pointing to the Scribes and Pharisees as a perfect example of what not to do.

First of all, they did not practice what they preached. Another word for this would be hypocrisy. They said one thing and did another. We can't really say a whole more about it, as this is something we are all very familiar with. We see it everyday, in the actions of people we know, and if we are honest, even in our own actions at times.

They made following God a burden. The way they did this was by imposing all kinds of rules upon people that were virtually impossible to follow in their entirety. So it put the average person in a position of never feeling like they could measure up to who God wanted them to be. The same would be true in some denominations today that over emphasize the rules. In others, it can come in the form of a sense of obligation to be at the church every time the doors are open, and serve in several different ministries.

And they served God for the wrong reasons, to draw attention to themselves, and because of what it would do for them. Basically what this meant for them was they would do things people considered religious, like praying, studying the Bible, and giving money to the poor, but do them in such a way that people could see them. And the reason they did this was because of the respect and admiration it would bring them within their communities. They would earn impressive titles, like Rabbi, or teacher, and they would be honored in public places.

We can see the same thing happening today. People working hard to bring attention to their acts of religious devotion and then going out of their way to make sure people who care about those kinds of things are aware of them. They post them on social media, or they find ways to bring them up in conversations they have with other believers. "Oh, my back hurts!" "What happened?" I strained it helping out the other day at the soup kitchen."

I imagine that as we moved through that list of three behaviors Jesus was telling his followers not to do, certain people you know came to your mind, or maybe just one person who embodies all three. Don't feel bad. I sort of did the same thing. The first time I read that passage this week I immediately thought of someone. In a moment I want to ask that person to stand. Of course, I'm not being serious. I would if I could, but they are not here. They can't be here.

It made me think of my grandma, but not because she was anything like the Scribes and the Pharisees; she was the complete opposite.

I have a confession to make. I looked at this passage with a preconceived idea of what I wanted to talk about this morning. That's a dangerous thing to do whenever you are trying to understand what a few Bible verses mean because it is so easy to make them say what you want them to say, and not what they actually say. This past Wednesday, November 1, was All Saint's Day. In churches where it is observed they will do so on the nearest Sunday.

I had thought about last Sunday, which was also Reformation Sunday. It seemed like a good idea, because if we have any saints in the Protestant Church, it would seem that the Reformers would be among them. But I was concerned about making the service go too long, which might lead to another reformation. I had these visions of coming to my office Monday morning to find a clock with both hands at twelve nailed to my door.

So my second option was this Sunday. It is difficult for me to hear that word saint without thinking of my grandmother. That's exactly how I referred to her when I spoke at her funeral a few months ago. She would have strongly objected, but she had better things to do than listen to a dry sermon filled with sarcasm. But it was with her in mind that I went to read the Gospel text for this morning. I thought, this is great, I can't use this text for All Saint's Day because this has absolutely nothing to do with her.

She was nothing like these Scribes and Pharisees.

She practiced what she preached. She didn't really preach. If you wanted to know what she believed, she would tell you, and she lived according to the way she believed.

For her, following Jesus was not a burden, but a joy. So much so that her faith was contagious. People wanted to know the God she served.

And she didn't serve God to bring attention to herself or to get some kind of recognition. She prayed for hours every day, but you wouldn't know it, unless you learned about it from the people she lived with, or saw the list on her bedroom wall of all the people she prayed for.

Then it occurred to me that Jesus' words of warning here about the kind of examples we should not follow are very appropriate, because in defining what a follower of God should not be, they also tell us what a follower of God should be.

In the Catholic Church the process of becoming a Saint is lengthy and elaborate. We have talked about it before so I won't go into it now. I have personally never met someone that has met the criteria. I would guess the same would be true with you. With such a painstaking process it is very likely we

would agree that the person really is a saint, but because we don't know any of them personally their influence on our own faith can only go so far.

The same could be said of the reformers we celebrated last Sunday. We are indebted to them in many ways, but the extent to which they have an impact on the daily exercise of our faith is minimal, compared to the saints we have personally known, the individuals who have lived out their faith before our very eyes, in ways that convicted us, challenged us, encouraged us, and inspired us, and taught us what it means to truly follow Jesus.

The saints we have known were probably not famous. The chances are good that they never wrote a book. They were not a sought-after public speaker. In the world's eyes that were nothing, but in our eyes they were everything. The faith that we possess, we owe in large part to their quiet, sincere, and humble example.

It goes without saying that we all owe our faith to Christ. But his disciples followed his example. Others followed their example. And so on. This is how the faith is passed down from generation to generation. Paul understood this, which is why he said to the Christians in Corinth, "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ."

This realization that we have all benefitted from the examples of others, should cause us to ask ourselves, "what kind of an example have I been setting?" To get to the answer to that question we can start by asking, "Do I practice what I preach or am I a hypocrite?" Do I make following Jesus look like a burden or a blessing? Am I following Jesus to make myself look good or to earn some kind of special recognition, or am I following Jesus because I can think of no better way to respond to his love for me?

After my grandmother's funeral the family gathered together for a meal and a time of fellowship. On that side we have a fairly large family, by today's standards. My Dad has five siblings. I am the second oldest of twenty-four cousins. Several of us now have children. In a family that large, especially as we all have gotten older, you would expect that not everyone would be present at a family gathering. But the one person that would have been there for certain, was not there. For me, that was when the reality of her death really began to sink in.

Thinking about that moment I was reminded of a poem that is often read at funerals, or printed on programs. It's called The Empty Chair.

### **The Empty Chair**

Time cannot heal the emptiness Or fill the empty chair  
The one that's in the family room I see it empty there

Or the chair that's at the table Where together we would dine  
Although I sit there still, The only hands that pray are mine.

Still I give thanks to God each day I pray this prayer comes true  
You save an empty chair for me, When I come home to you.

The next time we will see our loved ones who have gone on to be with Jesus, will likely be around a table. It will be a meal. It is sometimes referred to in Scripture as the wedding feast of the Lamb. The Sacrament of Communion looks forward to that meal because when Jesus instituted it at the last supper he said he would not eat the meal again with his disciples until he ate it with them in his coming kingdom. So Jesus will be there, but so will these who have gone on before us.

As we prepare our hearts for Communion this morning, I invite you to imagine yourself at this banquet table. Look at those who are seated around the table, beside you, across from you. Who will you look at and say, "I'm here, in part, because of your faithful example"?

Now who do you want to look at you and say those same words? Who do you want to be an example for? By God's grace and in the power of his Holy Spirit, do it.