**Holy Humility**

**Text: Matthew 23:12**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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It has been said that the world consists of two kinds of people: sinners, who think of themselves as righteous; and the truly righteous, who think of themselves as sinners. Of course, the truth is far more nuanced than this – we are all a complex mixture of righteousness and sinfulness – but there is *some* truth in this notion. We’ve all known many people who are painfully aware of their own faults and imperfections, who are quick to criticize themselves and admit their mistakes. But, when someone is hurting, they’ll be there for them, whether it’s bringing food to someone who’s been sick or visiting someone in hospital or sitting down over a cup of coffee or tea and listening to someone who needs to talk. These folks may be kind of hard on themselves, but they are very kind and gentle toward others, they feel the pain of the world deeply, they are very generous with whatever they have to share, and their lives reflect Jesus’ prayer, “Not my will, but thine, be done, O Lord.” These warm-hearted souls are saints. Thinking themselves sinners, they are perhaps the most saintly people we know.

But they’re not the *only* saints. Far from it. St. Paul sometimes speaks of *all* Christians as saints. Several of the letters that are attributed to him – letters written to churches not unlike ours – are addressed “to the saints who are in Ephesus,” or “the saints who are in Philippi.” Other letters are addressed to those who are “*called* to be saints” in Corinth or Rome or some other early church. So it is that each Sunday I have the joyful task of addressing the saints who are in Bedford; or at least that portion of them who gather at First Christian Church. Paul says that you are all saints.

Let’s think about what this word “saint” means. To understand a word in the Bible, we have to consider the Hebrew or Greek word that appeared in the original text. Standing behind our English word “saint” is the Greek word “*hagiazo*,” which means “to set apart” or “make holy.” Which is to say that a saint is not someone who is *already* holy or perfect, but someone who has been set apart by God *so as to become* holy or perfect. A saint is someone who has been called by God, through the grace of Jesus Christ; called out of the crowd of greedy, self-centered, controlling human beings (and aren’t we all, to some degree) – set apart from that crowd – and started on a journey toward a life of gentleness, and generosity, and trusting God, and putting the interests of others before one’s own interests; a life that is centered not on self, but on God.

None of us is there yet. None of us is so filled with grace that we have completely let go of ourselves and are completely centered on God. Which is to say that no one here is *so* saintly as to be perfect. Perfection is a blessing which is sought in this world and received in the world beyond. But we have been *set apart* for perfection. We are on a *journey toward* perfection. In other words, we who are gathered here today are *saints*; even as we remember this day those saints who have gone before us, those saintly sinners who struggled as we do with their imperfection in this world, and now know the life of perfection in the world beyond.

A wise saint is a humble soul who knows that he or she is not yet perfect. All saints are called to practice a holy humility. Which brings us to today’s scripture lesson. Jesus is contrasting the humble state to which the saints are called with the arrogance of certain religious leaders. He is specifically speaking of the Jewish scholars and teachers whom Matthew calls “the scribes and the Pharisees,” but Matthew’s Jesus could be talking about anyone who thinks they are much closer to that state of perfection than they really are; anyone who thinks more highly of himself or herself than the evidence warrants; anyone who calls attention to self and ignores others. Such self-centeredness is what the Greeks called “hubris” and the Bible calls “sin.” These are the ones who “exalt themselves.” Jesus contrasts these folks with the saints who are humble; those who will someday be exalted by God; those who practice holy humility.

“All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.” That’s what Jesus said, and unlike those religious leaders whom he criticized, he practiced what he preached. “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,” Paul says, “who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant… And being found in human form, he humbled himself and become obedient unto death – even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:5-8).

This is the holy humility that Jesus practiced, and the holy humility that all the saints – those who have been set apart to follow Jesus – are called to practice. Again, “Let the same mind be in *you* that was in Christ Jesus,” Paul says to the saints. And this is what Paul means by that: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others” (Phil 2:3-4).

As I pondered these things that Jesus and Paul have to say about holy humility, 3 words presented themselves to me: humble, perishable, and grasp.

The word *humble* comes from the same Latin root as the word *humus*. Humus is the very dark soil, rich in organic matter, that you want to have in your garden, or a farmer wants to have in his fields. It is very much of the earth, and it produces delicious fruit and beautiful flowers and bountiful grain. One who is humble has many of the same qualities as humus: lowly; of the earth; fertile ground from which God can draw forth the fruit of the Spirit, which includes love, joy, peace, kindness, generosity and gentleness. Jesus warns against those who exalt themselves, who want to place themselves on some kind of pedestal, or those who are delighted when others place them there. “Rather than be high and lifted-up,” he says, “be humble; be of the earth.” I love holding in my hands the kind of rich, moist earth that we call humus. It is so wonderfully fertile and holds so much potential. So it is with the saints. So it is with all of you. So it is with those who practice a holy humility.

What humus produces is wonderful and fruitful and bountiful, but it is also *perishable*. Helen and I have been enjoying some especially yummy potatoes in recent weeks, but as I was cutting some up for her the other night I had to throw away the last two because they’d gone bad. Even the best food, produced by the richest earth, is perishable. Even the best things in this life are perishable; destined to pass away. Even the most saintly are perishable and destined to die. To be sure, Paul speaks of imperishability and he speaks of perfection, but only in the context of that which is *beyond* this world. For example, when he talks about life beyond the grave, he talks about the dead – the perishable – being raised to imperishability. Those who are humble recognize to some degree the perishability of all that is of the earth. The *opposite* of humility is the vain attempt to exalt to some imagined *imperishability* those earthy things that are destined to fade away.

In other words, the opposite of humility is to *grasp* at something – to try to preserve something – that will, in the final analysis, dissolve in our hands. It is the attempt to cling to something that will die. It refuses to let go when it is time to let go. And in so doing, it prolongs suffering.

By 1967 Mickey Mantle’s baseball career was over, but he refused to recognize it. His knees were shot, his power was fading, but rather that retire gracefully he grasped at the notion that he was still a great baseball player. He groaned in pain every time he swung the bat. He was reduced to playing first base because he could no longer patrol the cavernous outfield of Yankee Stadium. And as he struggled through the 1968 season he watched his once vaulted batting average slip to near-mediocrity. The man was suffering. And he simply prolonged his suffering by clinging to that which was fading away. He refused to let go.

My friend Cheryl who died two weeks ago had battled cancer off and on for 7 years. The last year was particularly painful for her and her family. There were still treatments that her doctors wanted to try. Her life in this world might have continued for at least months, maybe even a year or two. But Cheryl knew that to cling to that desperate hope would’ve only prolonged her suffering, and that of her family. So she told her husband that she wanted to fly away.

A humble saint recognizes perishability and imperfection and chooses not to grasp at it or cling to it. A humble saint will not cling to something too tightly, or grasp at something beyond her reach. The things that we cling to may be beautiful, but the more we grasp that which is perishable, the more we are likely to suffer.

This is the wisdom of the sand mandala. Sand mandalas are made by Tibetan Buddhist monks. I want you to just look at it for a bit and absorb its beauty… It’s all made of sand. A group of monks will work on this for a week or two, carefully pouring out the sand and shaping it to this picture of near-perfection. And when they’re all done…they destroy it. It’s on display for maybe a day or two, and then the slate is wiped clean. Because, you see, when we’re on the journey to sainthood, we’re called to use our God-given gifts to produce the most excellent things that we can produce. But we’re also called to recognize that even the most excellent thing in this life is imperfect, and destined to decay.

Occasionally, a group of traveling monks will work on a sand mandala at Bloomington-First Christian Church. One year that had to leave as soon as they finished it and they left the beautiful mandala behind. Someone had the brilliant idea of preserving it. So we sprayed it with something and it got hard enough to take on the appearance of permanence, but when the custodian moved the beautiful work of art, she dropped it, and it shattered! It is folly to cling to that which is perishable.

Hear these familiar words of St. Paul’s:

“As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away” (1 Corinthians 13:8-10)

We are of the earth. The things that we cherish are of the earth. They are all perishable. And when we forget their humus-like nature – their *humble* nature and *our* humble nature – we grasp them too tightly and they dissolve in our hands.

Suffering is inevitable. To suffer is part of the human condition. But we make our suffering worse when we cling to that which is perishable. And all things are perishable. Only God is imperishable; only God, and those perishable things that God has chosen to raise-up to imperishability. If we try to grasp these things as we pass them by on the road to sainthood, we only impede our progress. We get stuck, and we suffer. Joy is found when we continue the journey, until that day when we will be united with all of the saints, in all of their perfection, and see them and see God no longer in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Amen.