11.1.26 Sermon on Matthew 23:1-12

“I want to be the very best, like no one ever was…” In our house, the Pokemon theme song is a regular refrain – and it’s all about wanting to be the very best. Gus sings it non-stop. So naturally, when I came to this passage this week, talking about greatness, I couldn’t help but hum the tune to myself.

But there is something to the way that Jesus describes greatness. We live in a world that spends an awful lot of time trying to tell us what or who is important. People with a list of accomplishments next to their names, their wealth, their influence, their titles, and their positions. We tend to celebrate those who stand out or rise above the crowd. We do things like give awards, or build monuments. We put names on buildings. And I get the appeal – the aspirations to “greatness.” I think there is an inherent part of human nature to want to be noticed. We want to be appreciated, to know that our lives have made a difference. And of course, there is nothing inherently wrong with either of those things.

Jesus has a rather different understanding of greatness. In today's Gospel lesson from Matthew, Jesus says something that turns the world's understanding of greatness upside down: "The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted."

On this All Saints Sunday, I think that is an especially important message for us to hear. Today we remember those who have gone before us. We remember family members, friends, neighbors, and members of this congregation whose lives have touched ours and whose presence we still miss. And when we think about the people we remember today, I imagine that what comes to our minds is not necessarily their titles, their accomplishments, or the positions they held. What we remember are the ways they loved us, cared for us, and the ways they showed up when we needed them. I imagine we remember the ways that they often quietly and faithfully tried to make life better for the people around them. Now that is the kind of greatness that Jesus is talking about.

In Matthew 23, Jesus is speaking directly about the scribes and Pharisees, people who occupied positions of religious authority. They knew the Scriptures and traditions and they occupied an important place in the community. Jesus has been a continual thorn in the side of the religious leaders of his day, as he persistently critiques their approach to authority. He accuses them of doing all of their deeds in order to be seen by others. He says they seek places of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and they enjoy having people recognize their position and titles. Jesus critiques them by saying that they have become more focused on how other people see them than on actually serving God’s people. Their religion has become a performance to be applauded, to elevate themselves.

Jesus, here, is warning his disciples not to follow that example, of seeking greatness for ourselves at the expense of caring for others. Jesus says that the desire to exalt ourselves can get in the way of the very thing God is calling us to do. When we are too busy making ourselves important, we have less time and less energy to make a difference in someone else's life. When we are focused on being recognized, we can overlook the people who need our attention, or when we are concerned with getting the best seat, we might fail to notice someone who needs a place at the table. And when our faith becomes performative or primarily about how we appear to others, then we have probably lost sight of the humility and love that are meant to be at the center of our faith.

Jesus offers us a different way: The greatest among you will be your servant. I think it is helpful to hear these words from Matthew 23 alongside the Beatitudes, which is the traditional reading we hear on All Saints Day. In Matthew 5, Jesus begins his Sermon on the Mount by describing the people who are blessed in God's kingdom, and much like Jesus offers a different vision for greatness in Matthew 23, here, he offers a glimpse of the upside-down kingdom of God:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."
"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."
"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."
"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."
"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy."
"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God."
"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."

In the Beatitudes, Jesus does not bless the powerful, or the self-important, or the ones who insist on getting their way. He blesses the humble, the merciful, the grieving, the gentle, the peacemakers, and those who hunger for righteousness. The Beatitudes describe the character of the people who belong to God's kingdom, and Matthew 23 describes the kind of behavior that characterizes their lives. Both passages remind us that following Jesus is not about aspiring to greatness or making ourselves look good, but it is about allowing God to shape us into people who love, serve, forgive, encourage, and care for others.

That's what sainthood looks like. A lot of the time, we have a tendency to think of saints as these extraordinary, famous people. We might picture stained glass windows, people with halos, stories of extraordinary accomplishments, so remarkable that the church decided to give them a special distinction. And certainly there have been people throughout history whose lives deserve to be remembered in that way.

But All Saints Day is also about something much closer to home: remembering the people in of our community whose faithfulness was expressed in ordinary, everyday ways. It's about the people who have gone before us who have loved their families, and served our church. It's about those who have cared about our neighbors, quietly doing want was right even when no one else was watching.

As we remember those who have died in the past year, we have the opportunity to see something of the Beatitudes reflected in the lives of people we actually knew.

Think about Suzi Davis for a moment – she was someone who found the greatest joy in being an aunt. She cherished her family, and always enjoyed bringing people together. And we can't remember Suzi without also remembering her intense commitment to service that extended well beyond her family into her unwavering support of the Charleston Police Department, helping to build relationships between officers and the community. She gave her time, and energy, and compassion to other people. There is something of the Beatitudes we can recognize in her life.

We can also think about Pat Joseph, who lived to be 101 years old. Her life was marked by faith, learning, generosity, and a commitment to doing what was right. She was a faithful leader who championed civil rights, adult literacy, care for the homeless, and environmental stewardship. Pat understood that faith

was not simply something to profess. It was something to live. It was something expressed through how we treat other people, how we respond to injustice, and how we carry ourselves through the ordinary challenges of life. And yet, perhaps what people who loved her might remember most was her gentleness, goodness, and constant smile. There is something of the Beatitudes we can recognize in her life, too.

And then there is John Barnes. John shared his musical gifts with churches throughout the Charleston area, playing the organ for congregations and friends for many years. His faith was central to his life. He cherished worship, fellowship, and Bible study. But even more, he spent many years lovingly caring for his mother. That, too, is an important part of his story. For anyone who has done it, you know that caregiving is rarely glamorous. It does not usually come with awards or public recognition. Much of it happens quietly, behind closed doors, in the ordinary routines and challenges of everyday life. It requires patience, sacrifice, and love. In those moments, we see something of the servant heart Jesus describes. John's life reminds us that faithfulness is not only found in what we do in public, but also in the ways we care for the people God has placed closest to us. We can find the Beatitudes at work in John's life.

We could say something similar about Ron Ellis, whose life was marked by devotion to his family, his work, and his church. He was a leader, sharing his gifts and his intelligence with all those around him. When I think of a quiet and steady faithfulness, I think of Ron. His kindness has held so many of us in so many ways. When I remember Ron, I see a Beatitude-shaped life.

And we remember Judy Lovell, who dedicated many years of her life working at St. Mark's. Her service to the church was part of a life that also included devotion to her family, her work, and her community. A woman of steady devotion, we can also find something of the Beatitudes lived out in her life.

We remember Phyllis White, a fixture of St. Marks for decades. Her steady commitment and service do not go unnoticed or unappreciated. Her dedication to serving her church and greater community through her work as a Lady of the White Shrine for much of her life will always be remembered as a reflection of the Beatitudes.

These are not necessarily the kinds of stories that make headlines. They are not stories about people who spent their lives trying to become famous or important. They are stories about practicing faithfulness.

And isn't that what we are really remembering today? We're not remembering perfect people, who never made mistakes or never did wrong. But we are remembering loved ones, who in their own ways, sought to live lives of faith, and love, and service – people whose lives remind us that goodness is often found in the simple and ordinary acts of kindness.

I think we need to remember that All Saints Day and sainthood is not about perfection. The people we remember today were human beings. They had their struggles, their frustrations, their disappointments, and their shortcomings. They were not always patient. They did not always say the right thing. They did not always get everything right.

And neither do we. Sometimes we hear Jesus' teachings about humility and service and think that we have to somehow become extraordinary people in order to follow him. But a faithful Christian life is not about becoming someone else, it is about allowing Christ to shape the person we already are. The

Beatitudes are not a checklist of accomplishments that we have to complete before God will bless us. They are a picture of God's grace at work in human lives. And Matthew 23 is not an invitation to compete over who can be the most humble. That would defeat the whole purpose!

We can even become proud of our humility. We can start thinking about how much we sacrifice, how much we serve, how much we do for others, and whether anyone has noticed. Jesus knows how easily that can happen, which is why he keeps bringing us back to these words of Matthew 23: we are not called to exalt ourselves. We are called to follow him, and Jesus himself shows us what that looks like.

He was the Son of God, yet he did not spend his ministry demanding special treatment. He welcomed children, he ate with sinners, he touched those who were considered unclean, he noticed people whom others ignored, and he stopped for those who were hurting.

Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, and ultimately, he gave his life in love for the world. Jesus didn't just talk about humility, he lived it. And when he tells us that the greatest among us will be our servant, he is not asking us to do something he was unwilling to do himself.

So what does all of this mean for us on this All Saints Sunday? First, it means that we should pay attention to the ways we measure success and importance. Are we obsessed with the achievement ladder? Do we hope people will remember us for our accomplishments or our status? Or will people remember us because we were kind or generous, or we listened to them? Will they remember that we tried to make room for people who were excluded? Second, All Saints Day reminds us that we are a part of something much larger than ourselves. We are a part of a community of faith that stretches across generations and geography. We are, quite literally, surrounded by the memory and witness of those who have gone before us. Their faith helped build the church we have today – their prayers, generosity, service, friendship, and love, have helped shape the community we now share.

And now it is our turn. We have an opportunity and a responsibility to carry that faith forward – not by trying to become important in the eyes of the world, but by practicing faithfulness in the eyes of God.

When we gather on All Saints Sunday, we often think about the people we have lost and the ways we wish they were still here. We remember their voices, their smiles, their habits, their stories. We remember the places they occupied in our lives, and we feel the emptiness left behind. That grief is real, and it is good because it is an expression of love.

But today is not only about remembering what we have lost. It is also about celebrating what remains. I love the prayer that is prayed during a committal service at the graveside, which says, "For all that this person has given to make us what we are, for that of them which lives and grows in each of us, and for their life that in your love will never end, we give you thanks." I love it because it names that the saints who have gone before us have indeed given something to each of us to make us what we are, and that it continues to live and grow within us and in our midst.

The love these folks have shared with us does not simply disappear. The kindness they showed us continues to shape how we treat others. The faith they lived continues to encourage our own faith. The lessons they taught us continue to guide us. And the example they set continues to remind us of what it means to follow Jesus.

Jesus says, "The greatest among you will be your servant." May we give thanks for the lives of those we remember today. May we carry forward their example. And may we, in our own ordinary and imperfect ways, continue to live the humble, faithful, loving lives to which Jesus calls us. Amen.