

“Practice What you Teach”

Text: Matthew 23:1-12

Prayer: O Wise Spirit, in our remembering today, empower us to live in light of the gospel, declaring its truth with our words, and embodying this truth through our actions. Amen.

The American theologian and preacher Walter Brueggemann in his sermon called *Saints Remembered and Saints to Come* offers three ways of defining a saint in 3 ways: 1) saints are the ones through whom the light comes upon us; 2) saints are people who know the meaning of the “other”, that is, who are kind and generous toward others and who respect people who are not like us – others of different race, age, class, culture, ethnic background and sexual orientation. Saints are those who know that the “other” may be where God meets us. 3) Saints are those who do not run when they smell death. They are unafraid of suffering and they stay in love where there is death or violence or illness. Brueggemann’s 3rd definition of saints led me to reflect on those whom we are remembering and honouring today – those who have offered their lives for the sake of saving others.

It reminds me of the war movie, Dunkirk. The movie tells one of the most remarkable stories of World War II—the evacuation of more than 300,000 British and French soldiers from the beaches around Dunkirk, France. The movie gives us a taste of a war trilogy: land, water & air. It vividly portrays soldiers stuck on the beach - desperately trying to find a boat to take them home before the German forces kill them. The movie highlights the story of a small yacht owned by an elderly civilian, Mr. Dawson, as he sails to Dunkirk to help, risking his own life, along with the lives of his son and his son’s friend. It also tells the story of a British Spitfire pilot as he spars with German fighters and bombers and his fuel levels sink until the plane lands critically on the seashore. The best part of the movie for me was the onset of hundreds of little boats driven by civilians that saved more than 330,000 soldiers. These non-combatant people, for me, were saints who risked their lives in order to save others.

In our gospel reading today, Jesus alludes to another definition of saints – those who practice what they teach and those whose finest virtue is humility. I almost did not wear my robe today.

Why? Because in this text, Jesus gets upset with the religious authorities – the Pharisees and the scribes, who proudly wear their robes with phylacteries and fringes so that everyone will know that they were the big shots of the temple. Phylacteries are those little boxes filled with scripture and strapped to the forehead, in adherence to “write these words upon your forehead”. Fringes are those tangly bits on the ends of the prayer shawls. Jesus, of course, was giving a word of caution to those who wanted attention more than anything else. Those who want people to notice how well / how prayerfully / how spiritually / how energetically they follow the religious laws. They enjoyed sitting at the head table and they loved to be addressed by their titles. I don’t know if there’s anything wrong with clergy robes or sitting in premium seats or even titles. I don’t think this is the point that Jesus wants to make.

Jesus spoke many times about practicing what you teach. He knows that actions speak louder than words. Jesus reminds his disciples and the crowd that faith is not about how many biblical verses you can quote, nor how many religious laws you claim to observe, but how wide is your reach of love, compassion and justice. So if someone used his or her religious authority to divide, label, and hurt others, then you don’t get it. The most dangerous temptation for all of us is to use words to make ourselves think that we are on the right track, when in reality our lives don’t come anywhere near to matching what we say. Not all of us are preachers, but most of us are teachers. Practice what you teach. Walk the talk. It's no accident that Jesus speaks here about the meaning of humility.

Humility- its root comes from the word for ground, humus. Being humble doesn't need to mean treating yourself like dirt. It can mean being fertile, grounded, filled with possibility, open to the planting of the seeds of hope and the watering of compassion and love. “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” What is this about being humble and the virtue of humility that Jesus would like us to emulate? In one occasion, Jesus told his disciples that the greatest in God’s reign, are those who humble themselves as a little child. To be humble - does it mean to feel inferior? Does it mean to put yourself down? Does it mean to compare yourself with others and come up short? Does it mean to have a walking inferiority complex? I don’t think so. Is the word humility equivalent to being

timid? To be afraid to say what's on your mind? To be scared to stand up and be heard? I don't think so. Humility is grounded in the conviction that everything we are and everything that we have are gifts from God. Therefore, how can we boast? How can we use these gifts as a measuring stick to elevate ourselves above others?" Humility is one of the hallmarks of a person of authentic faith and a central principle in God's reign. In 1927, Max Ehrmann wrote a beautiful poem called *Desiderata*. I'd like to share the first few lines of this poem as you reflect on humility:

Go placidly amid the noise and the haste, and remember what peace there may be in silence. As far as possible, without surrender, be on good terms with all persons.

Speak your truth quietly and clearly; and listen to others, even to the dull and the ignorant; they too have their story.

Avoid loud and aggressive persons; they are vexatious to the spirit. If you compare yourself with others, you may become vain or bitter, for always there will be greater and lesser persons than yourself.

Enjoy your achievements as well as your plans. Keep interested in your own career, however humble; it is a real possession in the changing fortunes of time.

Here at BCUC, I am surrounded by humble saints who practice what they teach and live their faith on a day-to-day basis. Saints who practice radical connectedness and hospitality. Saints with genuine humility and deep compassion. Saints who serve the vulnerable and pray for the sick. You embody the vision Jesus has shared throughout his life. And talking about saints, the one that I will never forget is war veteran Malcolm Young who passed away in 2015. The last time I visited Malcolm before his demise, he shared one unforgettable story he experienced when he served as a commander-in-charge in the Canadian Armed Forces in World War 2. In one of their operations, Malcolm and his men were ordered to bomb a barn thought to be a hideout of the Germans. Before Malcolm & his men executed the order, Malcolm thought he saw a white flag in one of the barn windows and made him decide to do otherwise. He asked his men not to destroy the place. And Malcolm did the right thing. After a while, out came almost 300 people, mostly women and children carrying white flags. 300 lives were saved just because of Malcolm's wise decision.

The unsung heroes of our times, those who we remember today, are saints in their own right. They certainly have done what they did because they knew it was the right thing to do. And I say this year after year in my sermon that we are not here to glorify wars, violence and deaths. We need to support the veterans and their families and those who are still out there fighting in wars. We need to earnestly say “thank you.” But our thanksgiving should lead to action, not in idleness, both in support of the well-being of the veterans and survivors and their loved ones, especially those who have been injured or traumatized by war.

Many of us have stories to tell – stories of both joy and sorrow. Stories of loved ones lost and those who stood proud after the wars were over. This day is a day of solemn honour as we seek God's wisdom and the will to preserve the hard-earned peace offered by those who served in wars. We are here to remember human sacrifice and suffering with a commitment to support the veterans and their families. To say no to the terror and violence and hatred that prevails in the world. And when the sun sets and we face the darkness of the world, all we can do is pray that God will give us some relief from our moments of uncertainty, from our very own storms in life. In humility, we remember those who gave everything they had. Lest we forget.