November 1, 2026
All Saints Sunday

Matthew 23:1-12 “The Kingdom Looks Like Them”

Today is All Saints Day in many churches across the world. This is a day when churches remember and honor those who have died and left a lasting impression on the church and the world. But before we get too far into that, let's talk about what it actually means to *be* a saint. Mary and I were talking about religious celebrities the other day. And I'm not talking about celebrities who happen to be religious, like Denzel Washington or Mark Wahlberg. I'm talking about religious *leaders*, mostly pastors, who find themselves in the public spotlight. Anyone remember Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker? They were big in the 1980s with their television ministry, *The PTL Club*. They became associated with the Prosperity Gospel Movement, which teaches that the more faithful you are to God, the more God will bless you materially. Give generously to God, and God will reward you with financial success, good health, and prosperity. It wasn’t long before scandal took them down, but here’s a cool fact – During the AIDS crisis of the 1980s, Tammy Faye interviewed an openly gay minister on the show and encouraged her audience to respond to gay people with compassion rather than fear or judgment. Her message wasn't at all popular with her particular audience, but

kudos to her for demonstrating what Christian love and grace should look like.

Let's consider another religious celebrity. The Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II is a nationally recognized preacher and activist. He served for many years as the pastor of Greenleaf Christian Church in Goldsboro, North Carolina. And if you're wondering about the "Christian Church," yes, he is one of ours. Barber has repeatedly appeared on national television and received recognition for his work organizing the Poor People's Campaign. He's certainly a religious celebrity, but his ministry has focused largely on those who do not have celebrity status like the poor, and others whose voices are often unheard and ignored.

Now, I could go on all morning naming religious celebrities. Joel Osteen, Cynthia Hale, Nadia Bolz-Weber, Rick Warren, and others. But here's what I'm leading up to. Are these people saints? Depending on who you ask, you might get very different answers. Some people would enthusiastically nominate one or two of them and absolutely reject the others. But what exactly qualifies someone to be called a saint? The Catholic Church has a fairly elaborate process for formally recognizing saints. First of all, generally speaking, you have to be dead. And there are several ways someone might qualify for canonization, including demonstrating heroic virtue, dying as a martyr for the faith, or freely offering one's life

for others in extraordinary circumstances. Anybody here think you meet those qualifications? Don't worry. I'm not asking for volunteers for anything.

When most of us hear the word "saint," we probably think of people like St. Peter, St. Paul, or St. Francis of Assisi. Francis is especially popular with gardeners because of his association with animals and nature. And then there are St. Patrick and St. Nicholas, whose names we've managed to associate with drinking green beer and a man in a red suit who delivers presents. It's amazing what we can do with religious history when there's a holiday to market! But the New Testament uses the word *saints* very differently.

Paul frequently addresses his letters to the saints of a particular congregation. In First Corinthians, he addresses people who are "*called* to be saints." And if you've ever read First Corinthians, you know that's a remarkable thing to call those people! They were arguing with each other, fighting over leadership, and generally giving Paul level 10 headaches. Yet he still called them saints. So, apparently, being a saint didn’t mean being perfect. It meant belonging to a community of people called to follow Jesus. And that brings us to this morning's scripture.

In Matthew 23, Jesus offers a pointed critique of certain religious leaders of his day. Remember, Jesus was Jewish, and these disagreements were taking place within the Jewish religious community. And his criticisms are just as relevant to Christian leaders today. Jesus says that some religious leaders don't practice what they preach. They place heavy burdens on others but aren't willing to help carry them. They perform religious deeds so other people will notice. And they enjoy places of honor, impressive titles, and public recognition. Sound familiar? I suppose we preachers *ought* to be a little uncomfortable with this passage. After all, some of us wear special robes and stoles, and stand in front of people, and sometimes insist on being called "Reverend." But Jesus isn't saying that it's inherently wrong to be recognized for doing good things. He's challenging the assumption that religious status and public recognition are the same thing as *faithfulness*. There's a difference between being admired for your religion and actually living according to its teachings. And then Jesus makes two statements that turn the whole conversation upside down. He says, "The greatest among you will be your servant." And, "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted."

In a world where people are constantly trying to climb the ladder of success, Jesus tells his followers that greatness *isn't* measured by how high you climb. It's measured by

how willing you are to serve. And that's where this passage connects with All Saints Day. When we remember the people who have shaped our lives and our faith, how many of them were famous? How many had impressive titles? Probably not very many. But they made a difference. They were the people who showed up when it counted. This morning, we're remembering two women from our congregation who died during this past year: Juanita Brockman and Wanda Story. Neither was a religious celebrity. Neither had a television show or a national following. But both made lasting contributions to the life of this congregation. Juanita faithfully attended our 8:30 worship service in the chapel for years. When we could no longer maintain that service, she transitioned to the 10:30 service without complaint. And we all know that changing worship times can be a big deal for some folks! But Juanita understood that the church was bigger than her personal preferences. She volunteered for Vacation Bible School, helped with potlucks and church events, and was one of those delightful people who seemed equally comfortable talking with children, teenagers, and adults. She helped make this church a place where people of all ages could feel welcome.

And then there's Wanda. Wanda worked in our nursery for all eighteen years that I've been pastor here and probably even years before that. Think about how many children passed through that nursery. How many parents were able

to worship because they knew their children were in good hands? Wanda also spent much of her professional life working with students with special needs in the Chico Unified School District. She devoted herself to kids who needed patience, understanding, and encouragement. And through all of that, Wanda dealt with some significant health challenges too. She knew what it meant to struggle, but she also knew what it meant to keep showing up for other people.

Now, I am not suggesting that Juanita and Wanda were perfect. They weren't. But then neither am I, and neither are you. And I suspect both women would be a little embarrassed if they knew we were standing here talking about them as examples of sainthood. But that's the point. Jesus doesn't say, "The greatest among you will be the person who never makes a mistake." He doesn't say, "The greatest among you will be the person who has all the right theological answers." He says, "The greatest among you will be your servant." And when I think about Juanita and Wanda, I think about people who understood that. They didn't have to be the center of attention. They simply found ways to contribute to the lives of people around them.

Sometimes we get so caught up in the spectacular that we overlook the ordinary. Most of the work of the church *isn't* very spectacular. It's people preparing meals,

teaching children, checking on folks who haven’t been around lately, or offering a ride to someone who can no longer drive. Those things don't make headlines. They don't make anyone a religious celebrity. But they make a difference. And maybe that's what Jesus wants us to understand about the kingdom of God. The kingdom isn't just something we're waiting for God to establish somewhere, someday in a distant future. It's something we begin to experience wherever and whenever people live according to what Jesus taught. Like whenever someone chooses compassion over judgment. Whenever someone offers kindness without expecting anything in return. Whenever someone serves instead of insisting on being served. That's what the kingdom looks like. And the saints who have gone on before us helped us see this.

But All Saints Day isn't just about remembering people who’ve died. It's also an opportunity to consider what *their* lives might teach us about our own. Think about the people who’ve made the greatest difference in your life. Maybe it was a parent or grandparent. Maybe it was a teacher, or a coach, or a Sunday school teacher. Maybe it was someone who believed in you when you weren't very good at believing in yourself. Chances are those people *weren't* trying to become saints. They were just trying to do the right thing. And somehow, through ordinary acts of kindness, they made a difference.

Now here's for you to think about this week: What if someone is looking at *your* life in the same way? What if there's a child learning what compassion looks like by watching how you treat people? What if someone discovers what it means to be loved because you took the time to care? We don't always know the impact that our lives have on others.

So today we remember the saints who have gone on before us. We give thanks for their lives and the ways they helped shape this community. But tomorrow morning, when All Saints Day is over, we'll go back to our ordinary lives. We'll go to work, run errands, and deal with the same challenges we always do. And somewhere along the way, we'll have an opportunity to make a difference in someone else's life. Maybe nobody will notice. Maybe nobody will thank us. But someday, someone may look back and remember a moment when we showed them kindness, offered encouragement, or helped them through a difficult time. Not because we were famous. Not because we were perfect. But because, when it mattered, we were there. We showed up.