

October 30, 2011
Joshua 3: 7-17
Matthew 23: 1-12

Good Morning. What a difference one week makes. To be sure, the world of Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church is certainly changed in one week. Last week, Stewart, MJ, and Cass Shaw were here filling the pulpit and the lectern. Today, Nancy Messersmith and I are filling those spots. This week, we recognize today, Reformation Sunday, Halloween is tomorrow, All Saints Day- November 1st. The Bible readings we have just heard speak about opposites of opposites of life – the triumphs and the burdens, boastfulness and humility and the faithfulness of God.

What happens when God calls to us and lays something on our hearts? Is it an epiphanal moment? Sometimes yes. Often times, it is in a quiet or unexpected moment and we are moved to give an answer. Joshua and Isaiah are two examples of Biblical prophets who responded to God's calls. In the first scripture Nancy read this morning, we hear about the Israelites preparing to cross over the Jordan into Promised Land. Many of us know the familiar story – Joshua is a man of faith, possessing qualities of leadership, a young

un-tempered man. God knows Joshua's leadership qualities and so does Moses. God knows and so does Moses that he will not enter into the Promised Land so Moses "hand picks" Joshua to be his successor. Let's face it, being Moses' "hand-picked" successor could go to his head and create ill-will among the rest of the followers.

Leadership was Joshua's burden to carry and his calling as well. I don't know the space of time between the appointment and the crossover, but I believe that God allowed Joshua to mature into the mantle of leadership. This maturation was accomplished by keeping God at his center.

Coming to the edge of any swollen river is a challenge. Questions fly from all quarters: **How are we going to get across? Are we going to get across? What if** the river overflows its banks? Have we come to this spot to **die?** I'm sure many of the Israelites who lived through the Exodus thought, "oh no – **here we go again.** The **promise is so close – yet so far away** over that swollen river." Here is where humble leadership comes into focus. Joshua led his people by planning, but he did not need to be in the spotlight to do it. God was the focus and the tribe of Levi, the priests, would lead them. Every time I hear this passage, I think of the Exodus story. During the

Exodus, God parted the Red Sea, carrying the bones of Joseph in the Arc of the Covenant. Once again, the river is parted, only this time it is the Jordan. Once again, the Arc of the Covenant goes before the people – being held in the center of the riverbed – until all have crossed over. Unlike the Exodus story, this spot of crossover was marked by a tower of stones in thanksgiving to God for safe passage. **God**, not man was given the glory.

“That’s all well and good” some may say today, “but how does that affect me today?” I don’t have to look at the historical catastrophes. My response is: “Look to Schoharie. Look to Upstate New York. Our fellow New Yorkers, our friends and in many cases family members have been devastated by flood waters.” Those people and communities have been given great burdens to shoulder, but what an **opportunity** to teach others about overcoming burdens through God’s help. What wonderful lessons we are all learning. Our parents and grandparents were always there to help others in need – knowing how to “make do” and

“stretch” whatever they had to help others. Fortunately, today, with the help of **many hands** – such as Nancy showed in this morning’s children’s story – we are called to help carry burdens – not for recognition or man’s glory, but just because we are thankful to God. And this brings us to the Gospel lesson and this morning.

As Matthew relates, Jesus is the bane of the Pharisees existences. He tells it like it is. He reveals the hypocrisy of those who are sitting on Moses’ seat. As a matter of fact in the next several verses he insults the Pharisees. The Pharisees are anything but humble. They want the world to see **their adherence** to the letter of the law. They want the commoners in the synagogue **to hear** their inflated prayers. They covet the power of their position and demand all the perks as we read in verses 5-7:

They do all their deeds to be seen by men; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues, and salutations in the market places and to be called Rabbi.

But what does Jesus tell us? How does He want us to conduct our lives? Jesus wants us to conduct our lives with humility, as a servant

to others, as his children who try to discern the will of God in their lives. This is not an easy task; however, many people I have known make it look easy. Jesus encourages us to be servants and cautions us in verses 11-12 that “whoever exalts himself will be humbled and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”

When I was going up, one of my Daddy’s favorite life-lessons was, “Listen to what people say, but **watch** what they do. The words and the actions don’t always agree. Then decide on their character.”

Another one of his life-lessons was, “I don’t care what you grow up to be. Don’t be impressed with your own importance. You are no better than anyone else walking this earth.” What he tried to do was make this passage from Matthew understandable to a young child. How he lived his life was an example to me of a humble man, a man not impressed with his own importance or accomplishments. He is just one of many people that I call the “saints” in my life.

This is the Reformation Sunday as I said at the beginning of this sermon. When Martin Luther nailed the 95 Thesis on the doors of Wittenberg Cathedral on October 31, 1519, he wasn’t trying to be as the Pharisees; he really didn’t want to be “noticed.” He was using the

front door as it was meant to be used – as a “town crier message board” to “discuss” the wrongs he saw in the Catholic Church of his day. Reformation can come in many ways and through many people.

We have all known “saints” in our lives – as children, as young adults and as seasoned adults. Right here at Hamilton Union many such people exist. Many such people have reformed and are still reforming our lives. I think of those we have lost in years past and in just this past year – people who embodied examples of a love of life and a profound humility to be the recipients of God’s blessings: Marty Edwards, Jack Oakley, Frank Snyder, Eleanor Schaadt, Shirley Friebel, and most recently Louise Pattison. And brings us to the reason for my occupying the pulpit and bringing the message this morning.

Stewart always encourages us to “listen for the movement of God’s call in our life. Do what you can to help.” On Thursday, a burden of grief was laid on the shoulders of our pastoral family with the death of Stewart’s mother. I spoke with him frequently on Thursday and on Thursday night after choir practice I called him again to discuss his thoughts about this service and next Sunday’s service. During the

course of our conversation about today I said, "I'll bring the Word. I'll preach" [I said this just as calmly as if I was telling him that was would fix dinner] to which Stewart responded, "That would be wonderful." [Now I have to tell you that the last time I gave a "sermon" was about 30 years ago and I didn't have a clue of what I was doing]. When I hung up the phone, I looked at Mark and said, "Did I hear correctly what I think I heard coming out of my mouth that I would preach on Sunday?" to which Mark replied, "Yes you did." And I replied, "I thought so. That has to be a Jesus moment." At that moment, my favorite Scripture verse popped into my head from Micah, the 6th chapter, verse 8:

He has showed you, O man, what is good;
And what does the Lord require of you but to
Do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk
humbly with your God?

AMEN.