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Gospel lesson

This reading follows immediately from last week, after Jesus answered all of the debate challenges posed to Him in the temple during Holy Week.



screencapture from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OEJImktNBqo; courtesy of Lumo Project Films – www.lumoproject.com

Matthew 23:1-12 NRSVue

1 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples,

2 “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’s seat;

3 therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it, but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach.

4 They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others, but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.

5 They do all their deeds to be seen by others, for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long.

6 They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues

7 and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to have people call them rabbi.

8 But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have
one teacher, and you are all brothers and sisters.

9 And call no one your father on earth, for you
have one Father, the one in heaven.

10 Nor are you to be called instructors, for you
have one instructor, the Messiah.

11 The greatest among you will be your servant.

12 All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all
who humble themselves will be exalted.

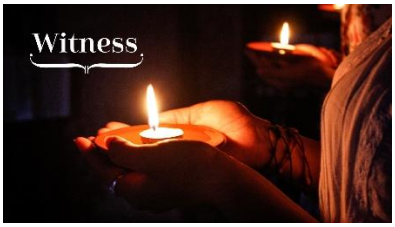
The word of God for the people of God

<Children's/Interactive time>

<Explain & do choral script for Revelation 7:9-17 with 4-5 volunteers>
<Oxford Vets Home – candlelighting here instead>

<resume screensharing in Zoom>
<Hymn "Cry of My Heart" TFWS #2165>

Message: Witness



picture from https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/always-give-thanks/week-3-twenty-third-sunday-after-pentecost-year-a/week-3-twenty-third-sunday-after-pentecost-year-a-always-give-thanks-graphics

Please pray with me?
God of unfailing light, in your realm of glory
the poor are blessed, the hungry filled,
and every tear is wiped away.

As we take time now to further consider today's scriptures, please
- speak Your words through my mouth,
- open our ears to hear Your message, and
- abide in our hearts,

That we may follow in the way of holiness, remember and honor those who went before us, and live as witnesses to Your love. Amen.

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On this All Saints Sunday, we conclude our "Always Give Thanks" series with "Witness":

"First, we are chosen, then we are tested. Now, we witness."[1]

All through the ages, people have been lost in sin. God calls the faithful to draw near to God and to proclaim God's glory through living love.

I would like for you to think for a moment about who you know who has solid faith, no real doubts. Do they lead a perfect life? What makes you think their faith is solid? Does their sureness convince you to believe what they believe? If not, what would?

<Let them respond if they are moved to>

Now think about someone who sort of believes. Have you talked with them about God/Jesus? What causes their hesitation? Can you wrestle your way to

[1] Theme summary taken from https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/always-give-thanks/.

stronger faith in pondering faith questions with them? <Let them respond if they are moved to>

What about someone who flat out denies the existence of God? Is there any way you might influence them to start to question if God does exist after all? <Let them respond if they are moved to>

The ancient Israelites had been through a lot. After forty years in the wilderness, pretty much all those who were adults at the time of the Exodus had died, so those remaining largely believed only because of the stories they had heard from their parents and grandparents, and the respect accorded Moses.

Now, Moses was dead and people began to doubt that God would stay with them. Joshua was to lead the people – how was he to fill such great shoes?

God understood the people's need for reassurance that God would remain with them after Moses was no longer there. So, like for the crossing of the sea to get the people out of Egypt, God parted the waters for the people to leave the wilderness.

I think it is important to note that this time, instead of just having one person symbolically cause the water to be held back, God used the twelve tribal representatives be the ones to whom God responded. Joshua told the people, "By this you shall know that

among you is the living God" – not tied to one person but present for all of the people, for all time.

The people took that to heart, trusting God enough to cross over to a new, non-nomadic way of life.
The psalmist centuries later shows the people still giving "thanks to the Lord, who is good, whose steadfast love endures forever!"

By Jesus's day, the people had gotten accustomed to ritual as the expected way to connect with God. Connecting with God through ritual is not wrong. Unfortunately, the people were being trained to think that that was the only to do so, giving the temple leaders a monopoly on access to God.

The scribes and the Pharisees were elevating themselves above others in all things. That is why Jesus told the people "not to do as they do," but to view all faithful as brother and sisters – an important consideration for each of us today, too.

Those who do the will of God bear fruit of the Spirit. Jesus pointed everyone to look to God as the ultimate authority, not anyone on earth. "The greatest among you will be your servant" and "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted."

Paul humbled himself before those whom he taught

about Jesus. Paul dealt with people in love, constantly giving thanks to God for them. He witnessed from a position of weakness so that God's power could work – and not only did the Holy Spirit strengthen the faith of those communities then, but the Spirit continues to work through Paul's writings even today to guide believers to Christ.

I believe the influence of every saint who humbled themselves [to enable God's Word to be heard in the hearts of people] is still affecting the world today. God calls us to be faithful saints too. But exactly how do we do that?

- First, I want you to take a breath and recognize God's blessing on your life. Each of us has been witnessed to by someone we would deem a saint. Give God thanks for them.
- Then, ask yourself: to whom have I witnessed about Jesus? Did I do so with humility and love rather than self-righteousness and demands?
- Recommit your heart once again to the Lord. Let the Holy Spirit fill you with grace and make you worthy of serving God despite past sins and failures.
- Let go of your need to be in control, to be seen as right or perfect, and think instead about how you can help others according to what they actually need rather than your judgement of what they should have.

- Support those you see doing God's work. In this country, Tuesday is Election Day – if you have not already, go vote for those who bear the fruit of the Spirit – and note that they do not have to be Christian for God to work through them.

  At the end of their exile, the Israelites called the Persian king Cyrus God's anointed one – a messiah – even though he did not worship God.

  Our Savior did not come to save religious institutions, corporate structures, or political interests, but to save the people of God. Pray to the Lord for guidance, look beyond propaganda for who is actually **humbly** serving the people well, and vote for them.
- Serve others as Jesus would have you serve them. Live grace-filled love shared with others.

Through such humble, loving service, you will influence others with the power of the Holy Spirit in a way that lives far beyond your time in this life. May the Lord find each of us to be faithful witnesses proclaiming God's holy glory through living love.