

Reformation Sunday
All Saints Celebration
November 5, 2017

"A FEW GOOD MEN (AND WOMEN!)"
by Mary Anne Biggs

Joshua 3:7-17 ~ Matthew 23:1-12

Imagine for a moment today that you could be a member of a team where there are no stand out stars ... but everybody does the job. When one fails ... the others step up to help out ... when one falls ... another steps in to keep the team going. Imagine you could play on that team and keep winning ... in spite of hardship and heartache and injury and occasional loss ... until you reached the goal of the prize you set out for in the first place. Wouldn't you like to play on that team? Does a team like that even exist? Well that's the church as Jesus intended it to be ... the beloved community where everybody is loving towards the other, and nobody needs to play the Pharisee.

Don't get me wrong. As I've said before, the Pharisees get a bad rap in the New Testament. They've been misunderstood. On whole, they were a bunch of stand-up guys who just got a little carried away. I understand the Pharisees. The Pharisees were the "critical parents" of the first century Jewish faith. They felt responsible for the institutions of their faith. They cared about their people and wanted them to do right. They believed in the scripture and thought that people ought to obey it. They worked hard to be the spectacular models of propriety and holiness before God ... and to keep everybody else on the straight and narrow. It was their religious duty, but some of them went a little overboard and ended up throwing the baby out with the bath water.

And never confuse Jesus' enemies among the Pharisees with all Jewish people ... then or now. They don't represent all Jews any more than some televangelists represent all Christians or even most ... and the way Jesus' enemies in the gospels have been used as a reason to preach hatred and violence against all Jews down through the centuries is a shame on the Christian church. A shame! Besides, it misses the point.

Who are the Pharisees of our day? Can you think of a deeply religious people who try to take the Bible seriously and obey it ... and try to make everybody else around them obey it? Can you think of any folks who are sincerely devout, but a little simplistic when it comes to separating the values of their culture from God's own Holy Word? The Pharisees could be you and I ... at least some of the time.

For the most part, these were not evil men. They were products of the system. They were just living by the rules they'd been given and thinking it was God's work. It's not far off from being a pastor. And I'm going to let you in on a little secret, being a pastor can be seductive. We are all people pleasers by nature. A few pats on the back go a long way to keep us encouraged. And if you aren't careful, the attention can go to your head.

And sometimes pastors feel too personally responsible for everything that happens in the church, as if God weren't the one in charge. That is what is at the heart of a Pharisee. A person who has lost faith that God will make things turn out right so he - or she - needs to seize control and make it happen. God isn't running this church right, so I'll do it. God isn't punishing the evil doers enough, so I'll do it. God isn't making the divine judgment clear enough, so I'll do it. Pharisees try to God's job for God, and they can drive people away from God in the bargain.

Of course, pastors aren't the only ones. Every church has its share of Pharisees. Pharisees are diligent and dedicated. They have position in the institution. They accomplish a lot by their efforts and start feeling proud of their accomplishments. They take too much credit, and usually they feel too much responsibility. They work hard, and it makes them anxious when the slackers around them don't do their part. And then along comes some guy like Jesus who treats everybody the same and even lets the slackers off the hook.

Institutions are good and we need them. Organized religion gets a lot more done than disorganized religion ... and it preserves the gospel for the generations to come. But institutions also breed Pharisees. And Pharisees revel in rules and more rules. Last week marked the 500-year anniversary of the Reformation, and remembered the historical moment when the church almost seized up with clogged arteries in the body of faith. When you compare the church of the Middle Ages to the church of the apostles, you wonder how it came to this. A powerful central clergy wielding power and selling grace. A corrupt clergy living like Kings while surrounded by people living in poverty. Manifold layers of church bureaucracy with everybody defending his little corner. The Reformers like Luther and Calvin fought the battle to purify the church ... to return to a simple message of grace and faith and the authority of scripture ... without all the additional burden of church policies that only an elite power group could manage ... with traditions few of the lay people even understood. But the Reformers were wise. They knew the way of the human heart ... how pride always creeps back in ... and all-too-human forces forge the very people who love the faith ... into proud rule-making, gate-keeping Pharisees. Therefore, they taught, the church must be in a continual process of reformation. We call this "revival," a renewal of God's Spirit in the hearts of the people.

And where shall we look for this re-formation, for this revival? To the saints of the church, I think. Though we are celebrating it today, last week was also the church's recognition of All Saints ... and the saints of the church are a continual source of renewal. I don't mean the formal order of saints of the Roman Catholic church or any other sacred Hall of Fame. Nor do I mean that saints are heroes, in the strictest sense. The heroes of the faith have provided strong, visible leadership in days of crisis and opportunity. Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Zwingli ... Teresa of Avila, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Dorothy Day to name a few, are the heroes we know and remember because of their great deeds or profound writings. They deserve to be remembered, too. But the saints of the church are invisible and generally nameless.

Most of us are like the little boy who was disciplined for bragging all the time and told by his mother he had better learn humility. A few days later she heard him bragging to his buddies again. "What happened to humility?" his mother demanded. "Oh, I was humble for a while, Mom" he said, "but nobody noticed!" If you want someone to look up to ... look down, and look around. Saints are the people *not* noticed for the good they do because they don't seek attention

or credit or control. They just do the work ... day after day, year after year... as long as they can ... as long as they're here. They would never consider themselves saints because they are too humble. In fact, they don't think often of themselves at all because they are thinking mainly of others. They are cooking meals for the hungry, visiting the sick, cleaning house for the dying, feeding a friend at a nursing home. Look for them to be here to chop the celery or quietly cleaning up after the last amen. They are the ones painting the shed or mailing the newsletter. They are beautiful without worrying about their appearance. They are strong without working out in the gym. They are faithful ... not out of a sense of duty ... but because it's who they are. Meet them in almost any circumstance of life ... even in poverty or illness or loss ... and they speak of their gratitude for the tender mercies of God. Point out their struggles and sorrows, and they tell you of their victories and joys. Like Joshua, they trust in God to lead them to the Promised Land. Ask them to pray for you because they will. These are the saints.

The saints are people who make a difference by their presence because Christ is so clearly present in them. They influence us not by command and control but by example. Back in the days when our son was young I drove the carpool to soccer, and the noise alone could drive you stark raving mad. The kids loved to sing "I know a song that gets on everybody's nerves" because it did. You know it, don't you? "I know a song that gets on everybody's nerves, I know a song that gets on everybody's nerves, I know a song that gets on everybody's nerves, and this is how it goes: I know a song that gets on everybody's nerves." and so on, *ad infinitum, ad nauseum*. A few rounds of this and I was ready to run screaming into the night. And if I begged, pleaded, cajoled, or commanded them to stop singing it right now and I mean business or else, they would just sing it all the louder! They knew they had my attention! One day, instead of complaining or commanding, I simply started singing a different song. "Ninety-nine bottles of beer on the wall, ninety-nine bottles of beer!" Okay, maybe not a good tune for a mother to sing to impressionable children, but it worked! Lo and behold, they dropped the "nerves" song and joined right in! Of course, I got tired of that song before they even got to 95, so I started singing, "The itsy-bitsy spider climbed up the water spout" And again, they took the song right up! In a way, that's what the saints do. When disharmony and negativity and chronic complaining in the fellowship are driving everybody crazy, they don't turn into Pharisees and try to seize control so they can command us to straighten up and get along! No, they just change the tune and start singing a melody of peace and joy. With their positive spirit - God's Spirit! - they set the tone for gratitude with their words of thanks and praise. They remind us of our need to pray with requests and reminders of those who are sick. They respond to criticism and complaint ... not with reproach ... but with a soft answer and a kind word. And without even realizing why, the rest of us are soon singing right along with them.

We have had our share of such saints here at First Congregational UCC. In the past few years we have welcomed new members and we are so glad that you are here. But you never knew and so cannot remember the sweet people who built this place for you. Some of them are still living and serving in other places. And some live now in nursing homes, and you only have a short time to go meet them to say thanks for all they did for you. And many ... too many to list in one service ... have gone to be with the Lord. But since they are with the Lord ... and gathered here in worship we are with the Lord ... we are all here together with the Lord today. They are still with us. They are our cloud of witnesses, rooting us on from the balconies of heaven. Let us

give thanks for all these saints and be revived by their Spirit of steadfast faith. And let us make our church a Pharisee free zone.

Jesus has remarkable words about the Pharisees in the gospel of Matthew. "Do as they say and not as they do." His harshest words were reserved for the proud religious leaders of his day who shut people out from the joy of God's grace and considered themselves better than everybody else, more beloved of God. Those Pharisees can never bring revival of the Spirit in the church because they kill the Spirit with their harsh dogmatism and negative judgments. They are always criticizing everyone. But the saints revive us ... again, and again, and again.

Jesus has already filled the Messiah slot ... we need no other. And it's not some elite group of righteous leaders, but the whole church ... the communion of the saints ... the beloved community ... the people of God ... who embody the gospel in the world. So, if you want to be great, be a servant ... be a saint. And you will lift us all a little closer to God.

May we pray?

O God, because not a one of us deserves to be here, we stand on equal terms in your church. Because life is too short to waste on preening pride, we choose to serve rather than compete with one another. Because the isolation of the rugged individual is just loneliness disguised by bravado, we enjoy the simple gift of each other's company. And in the humble saints of your church and in the uncredited service to its members and in the congregation as a whole, we meet Jesus again and rise again to life in his name. Amen.