Can Humility Be Taught?
Matthew 23:1—12; Joshua 3:7—17

I wanted to talk with you this morning about humility, but to be honest, I'm a little distracted. The passage from Joshua has got me thinking about the *Ark of the Covenant;* and if you've been around for a few decades like me, all you may know about the *Ark of the Covenant* is that it was lost— and that Indiana Jones found it outside of Cairo… before the the French archeologist stole it from him and left Indiana for dead in a tomb full of nasty, slithering snakes. With the John Williams score playing over all the action, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* was a great story. But by the end of it, when the *'Power of God'* is boxed away in a warehouse in Washington D.C., I don't feel very humble; and I don't learn very much about humility because the only thing I'm motivated to do is buy more popcorn. Or maybe, maybe if I'm so inclined, I can caravan to Washington, D.C., and petition Congress to do something about the *'Power of God'* that's being kept from us.

Let's face it. In today's culture, humility has fallen on hard times. People who lead humble lives don't make the news. None of the headlines and none of the podcasts are going to feature a story on someone who gives space for others, someone who pulls back, someone who deflects the spotlight. On the contrary, what social media has taught us to do is eat up the controversy: *What BIG EGO has clashed with what BULL in which CHINA SHOP? Which celebrity will star in the next sequel to Raiders of the Lost Ark?* Harrison Ford has got to be getting up there. And I wonder, now that he's pushing 85, if he has any thoughts on the *Power of God and where it's gotten to*... I wonder if we do!

All Saints Day comes and goes; and politely we acknowledge it like many churches do every year. Ideally, what the day celebrates are the *stars* in the life of a community of faith—and by STAR we mean SAINT, and by SAINT we mean a SANCTIFIED human being. In other words, a saint is someone, who while living, acquiesced to being made holy. And, in the Bible, the way that process begins can be traced back to the Ark of the Covenant—to Moses, who originally brokered the covenant with Yahweh—and then to those who presumed to occupy *the Seat of Moses*. But did they? You see, the ironic twist of occupying the Seat of Moses is that you don't really occupy it. You surrender it. You don't just get to teach the Law of Moses, you allow space for others to practice it. Literally speaking, the Ark of the Covenant is a container. The only thing it carries, other than sheer emptiness, is the Contract between God and God's People. It's doesn't have room for all of our accumulated knick-knacks and trophies. It's not a storage unit for the furniture we can't seem to donate or throw away. It's not a private suitcase or a clandestine briefcase. It's not a crate of imported goods from Egypt. All that's inside the Ark of the Covenant are words, carved in stone: ***"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery…"*** And now, notwithstanding what Stephen Spielberg had in mind, no one knows where it is. As far as we know, it's disintegrated into dust and lost to history. There is no more space and no more space container.

But is it lost? Aren't you here with me? And don't we have room? In Deuteronomy 6:6, Moses says, ***"Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise…"*** And so—MAKE ROOM. YIELD SPACE. DE-CLUTTER.

When Dan Rather interviewed Mother Teresa and asked her what she says to God in her prayers, the famous reply was that she doesn't say anything; *she listens*. And when Dan Rather then followed up, exploring what God says to her, she offered: God doesn't say anything. *God listens.* So there we have it: for all the good work of this Saint from Calcutta, India, for all that she did for the orphaned and leprous children who lived and died there, what makes her a saint how she decluttered her heart from all the egocentric racket. And although she never had biological children to brag about, she gave God WOMB.

Last week I mentioned how I merely know *the gist* about cars. I know the gas pedal and I know the brakes, and I think I'm a good driver. And yet, if something should go wrong and the car were to need fixing, I'm at the mercy of those who've been trained in the art of making those repairs. Well, here's another story that speaks to my ineptitude, and as I tell it, I pray that you'll make the connection to how *humility is learned in Christ.* Here goes: up and until the day Sheryl and I married, no one had taught me how to drive a stick-shift. All I had known were automatics. But since Sheryl owned a Ford Escort with a manual transmission, she was determined that I would learn how to drive her car. And so, picture the scene: an open parking lot… so we have plenty of space. She gets out of the drivers-side seat and invites me to take her place behind the wheel. Next to me now, she's explaining how to shift so that I don't stall or grind the gears; but with my foot on the clutch-pedal and my hand on the stick, the best my coordination can must is a smooth transition in *Reverse.* Going from First to Second to Third—forget it. And then, in total exasperation, I lost my composure. '*Doggonit, Sheryl—I can't do this! Maybe we can go in reverse forever.'* Now, what's happening?

Every saint, of every sort, in every life, allows space. That is—we yield to the potential of others just as we yield to the potential that God wants to bring into existence. But here's the problem that Jesus recognizes in Matthew's Gospel. Let's say there are certain scribes and certain Pharisees who are *so certain* they sit in the Seat of Moses they cannot imagine themselves surrendering that special space to anyone else. Hmmm. Their teaching, of course, is spot-on. They can shift from Genesis to Exodus with ease—and from Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy with dexterity and finesse. But now—*Do what they're saying!* Apply what's being verbalized! Embody it with hands and feet and heart and mind! That's going to take some space, some trial-and-error, some risky experimentation. ***"Do whatever they teach you,"*** Jesus says in Matthew 23:3, ***"and follow it, but do not do what they do."*** Why? Well, could it be that they're not yielding space?

I've heard a few church people, from time to time, use what Jesus is saying here as if it were an indictment of all pastors, all priests and basically anyone who tries to lead God's People, or as a condemnation for anyone who strives to get an education in theology. But I don't think that's his intent. His intent, I'd suggest, is to humiliate. His intent is to induce shame—but only for those who would try to occupy too much space in the minds of others:

"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. They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and they fringes long. They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to have people call them rabbi."

You see, that's too much space. It's great to have a healthy ego—or to take pride in one's self. But don't just read the Bible. Read the room.

Once upon a time, believe it or not, I was a young pastor in a small town with a small-town grocery store; and instead of grape juice for Holy Communion, I took it upon myself to purchase a bottle of red wine. Well, at 27 years old, I could have been mistaken for a 17-year-old with a fake I.D.; and in the check-out line, the cashier didn't believe me when I told her I was the new Presbyterian Pastor, who just happened to be getting wine for the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. She said, "I don't care if you're the Pope himself; can I see your Driver's License please?"

The Apostle Paul wrote letters to various house churches around the Mediterranean, Asia Minor and Rome. And a couple of things he scribbled down or dictated to others from his prison cell make me wonder. ***"If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh,"*** he says in Philippians, chapter three,

I have more… Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

And then, in Romans 15, he tells the church,

"I hope to enjoy [their] company for a little while. At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem in a ministry to the saints, for Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to share their resources with the poor among the saints at Jerusalem."

Are we hearing this? Northwood Presbyterian Church will not be able to shift into second or third or fourth gear UNLESS we do likewise: make space for the saints—*a ministry to the saints*. I, as your interim pastor, find myself in the process of making space. There's going to be a new pastor. But you? You also have something to learn in the process; and I wonder what it is. And I wonder about the people for whom you will become saints by giving them space.

In a previous church there was a raggedy, ragamuffin man who wore denim overalls and a stained t-shirt. We called him 'Father Tom' because the scuttlebutt was he had been ordained in a renegade congregation which had broken away from Roman Catholic Church. Father Tom didn't necessarily want to be called 'Father,' but he knew Latin, Greek and Hebrew and could quote the greatest theologians of the twentieth century. And yet, what he did to survive was odd jobs, manual labor for the upper class folks, moving into *Kendall Yards*; and when I saw him riding his bicycle through the neighborhood it might have seemed as if he were talking to himself, when he was really speaking to God. And so, I invited him to preach, which he did with a gravelly voice and great passion; and afterwards, since he declined the money we planned to give him, he asked instead if we could have breakfast. We did. We broke the fast; and here's what I learned while he was sitting across from me. The night before, while stripping paint from some wooden furniture that had belonged to one of his clients, Father Tom had burned his fingertips with some of the chemicals. And as he ate his French Toast, fumbling with his fork and knife, the bandages on his hands would fall off into the syrup. The bandages would fall off into the syrup… Now I will admit to being a little grossed out and a little nauseated by the raw redness of his skin. But then, of course, I remembered SOMEONE ELSE WHO sits at a table with me on days like today.

And SOMEONE ELSE WHO breaks bread with all of us—our best and only teacher. And, by the end of his days of service, his hands, with which he broke that bread, had been pretty torn up. As we speak and share this space, with the saints of our lives, they're still pretty raw—