

Weekend of Sunday, November 1, 2020 – All Saints Sunday
2021 Annual Stewardship Campaign – "Faithful Amid the Fray"
22nd Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 31/Proper 26/Year A
First Reading: Philippians 1:3-11
Gospel Reading: Matthew 23:1-12
Sermon Title: "Pure & Blameless for Glory & Praise"

Theme

Zion is a VITA site. VITA stands for Volunteer Income Tax Assistance and is an initiative of the IRS designed to support free tax preparation services for the underserved. This service helps low- to moderate-income individuals, persons with disabilities, and the elderly file their taxes each year. Of course, last winter and spring, right in income tax filing season, we were told to go into pandemic isolation and VITA at Zion was shut down. When restrictions loosened, many sites, such as churches, libraries, etc., did not re-open or restricted access to their facilities to only essential business. Zion was called and asked if we were still willing to host, and to the person, not only was our site available, and all our volunteers available, Zion was asked to host another VITA group who had lost their site. "Faithful Amid the Fray?" You decide.

Text

Matthew 23:1-12

¹Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, ²“The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; ³therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. ⁴They 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. ⁵They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. ⁶They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, ⁷and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. ⁸But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. ⁹And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. ¹⁰Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. ¹¹The greatest among you will be your servant. ¹²All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Philippians 1:3-11

³I thank my God every time I remember you, ⁴constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, ⁵because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. ⁷It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. ⁸For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. ⁹And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight ¹⁰to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, ¹¹having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Sermon

Today I am starting the four-week 2021 Annual Stewardship Campaign that I have entitled, "Faithful Amid the Fray." That title occurred to me months ago when I observed members of this church insist on doing the ministry they are used to doing despite the COVID-19 pandemic. Each week there will be a sermon starter video featuring people from our fellowship, whom you probably know, who, in my opinion, did and continue to do ordinary ministry in this extraordinary time. And that makes them, "Faithful Amid the Fray."

Video

Those three Zion members, Kim Ilgenfritz, Art Roden, and Carol Jesse, are just a few of several that volunteer at Zion's VITA site. It is worth mentioning again that, though VITA shut down all its sites about the same time the governor shut down all of Ohio, later, when Ohio had flattened the COVID-19 curve, VITA called to see if Zion was willing to reboot its site. Zion's Council said yes. And when VITA asked Kim to ask Art and Carol and the rest if they were willing to provide this valuable service during the pandemic, putting themselves at risk of contracting COVID-19, they all said yes.

And then, since many other sites, like libraries and churches, did not re-open in a timely manner, VITA asked Zion if we would be able to host one of those displaced VITA teams, and Zion's Council said yes again. I am proud of these three, and our Council who chose the path of service to the community, making them and this church, "Faithful Amid the Fray."

During the four weeks of the campaign, The Gospel Readings will be the Gospel Readings prescribed for the day, however, most of my scriptural attention will be on the First Reading from Paul's Letter to the Philippians. The reason for that is that while we 21st Century Christians see him as a hero of the 1st Century New Testament, and indeed he is the author of more of the New Testament than anyone else, his life as the evangelist to the Gentiles was anything but easy. He is a good example for us of being "Faithful Amid the Fray."

Just a little information about Philippi will make you more familiar with the context of this letter. Philippi was a major Greek city northwest of the nearby island,

Thasos. Its original name was Crenides and was established by Thasian colonists in 360 BC. The city was renamed Philippi by Philip II of Macedon in his own honor in 356 BC.

Philippi was the site of the defeat of Julius Ceasar's murderers, Brutus and Cassius by Antony and Octavian in 42 BC. After that battle, the town became a Roman colony, a settlement for veteran Roman soldiers who possessed the rights of self-government under Roman laws and freedom from taxes. We can see how that would make the community of Phillipi attractive and patriotic and friendly to all things Roman and on the contrary, hostile to all outside foreign influences.

Philippi was on a major trade route connecting Europe and Asia, and in about the year 49 CE that same route brought the apostle Paul to Philippi where he found only a few Jews. There were so few Jews in Philippi that there was no synagogue, as it required ten married men to establish one. This little bit of information is important because typically, Paul came into town and began teaching and preaching the Gospel in synagogues, until he got kicked out to continue his evangelism in house churches he founded.

From the very beginning of Paul's work in Philippi, there had been opposition, and evidently, opposition to the church was very active at the time Paul wrote the Letter to the Philippians because the main theme of this letter is persistence in faith in the face of opposition and even the threat of death. Paul offered himself as an example of steadfast courage and joy amid harsh circumstances and possible death. He turned attention away from a preoccupation with his own fate toward the joy he experienced through the proclamation of the Gospel.

Paul began his letter to the Philippians by saying that he thanked God for them every time he thought of them. Now just imagine how difficult it was to establish a new religion in an already polytheistic pagan culture. By thanking God for them he was lifting them up in prayer for their continued success in the proclamation of the Gospel. Paul saw them as partners with him in the Gospel. They welcomed him and listened to what he had to say.

I am certain that Paul's proclamation was full of passion and emotion and was quite convincing. But it was also new and different. And while we might think that worshiping the stone idols of polytheistic paganism is weird, it had been practiced

for thousands of years. Paul came on the scene and tried to convince the Philippians that a crucified peasant Jew was God! But obviously, there was something about Paul that made his testimony convincing enough to gain traction in Philippi.

Paul's spiritual gift was evangelism not pastoring. By that I mean, his gift was to go into a community and preach and teach the Gospel. Once there was some momentum among the community of faith in that place, he moved on to another community and did it all over again. But he still maintained a level of authority over the fledgling communities so that the orthodoxy of the faith continued. Paul did that with genuine brotherly love. And we can sense that it was reciprocated back to him by the Philippian Christians in this letter.

The reason Paul wrote a letter instead of simply traveling to them was that Paul was in prison, and the Philippian Christians had heard about it and had sent him a gift. The courier who brought that gift was Epaphroditus, a member of the Philippian fellowship and since he was to return, Paul wrote them a letter that Epaphroditus took with him.

During this particular time, Paul and the Philippian fellowship were experiencing the same kind of trouble. And that trouble was persecution by non-Christian authorities. For Paul, it resulted in him being imprisoned. This was not the first or last time Paul would suffer persecution. In Second Corinthians, Paul listed the many sufferings that he endured for the sake of the Gospel. But in this short letter, we would never know that. Paul didn't complain about his being imprisoned – in fact, we know that he used his time in prison to preach to those he had to testify to, to his guards, and his fellow prisoners, and to just about anyone who would listen.

On the contrary, look at this verse in which Paul wrote:

⁹this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight ¹⁰to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, ¹¹having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Amid the fray of persecution and imprisonment, Paul prayed that the Philippian fellowship would overflow with love and knowledge and insight! Why? Because

Paul taught that this life, this world, this realm was just the opening act for life eternal with God, the Three in One. The world will do what it will, but the call of Christ on his life and the lives of the Philippian Christians called them to a higher level. There would be no fighting back, no giving up, just love overflowing with knowledge and full insight. And why would they do that? Paul answered so that they will be pure and blameless, for the glory and praise of God.

Now, I feel I have to explain the "pure and blameless" part, because if you asked me if the world ended right now, would I be found "pure and blameless" my answer would be a big "noper. Nope, I have messed up plenty in life. I don't plan to do it, but I manage to accomplish it just the same."

What Paul meant about being "pure and blameless" is that once we come to the knowledge of the truth of Jesus Christ as God's messiah and our savior from our sins, then we are made righteous by his work, and his work alone. So all we have to do is be faithful amid the fray – try to do the right thing, and rely on the love, grace, mercy, and righteousness of Jesus Christ for the rest. When we do that, we will be "pure and blameless." This is where Martin Luther came up with his "sin boldly" philosophy about the redeemed life.

And when we *are* pure and blameless, we produce what Paul called "the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God."

Let me put it another way. Though I could not get Kim, Art, and Carol to say what I wanted them to say, I hope what you saw in their video were three people who:

- love the Lord Jesus Christ,
- and who, out of thankful appreciation for what he has first done for them,
- and in being good stewards of their God-given spiritual gifts,
- joyfully provide a service to the elderly, poor and working poor, and people who don't have the intellect or patience or frankly, the interest in filing taxes.

Each of them can find other things to do on cold dark late winter and early spring nights. They knew they were putting themselves in harm's way, risking exposure to COVID-19 during a pandemic when we were told to stay home for all but essential activities, but, you see, this is their ministry, this is how they use what God has

given them to live out their lives of discipleship, and they knew people were counting on them.

The Give Table and I talked about this year's Annual Stewardship Campaign and discussed what its emphasis should be, and what we decided is that this year may just not be the year to emphasize *treasure* – here I am referring to the three aspects of personal stewardship – *time, talent, and treasure*.

Maybe like me and my staff and the staff of ZCELC, you got laid off or reduced hours resulting in reduced pay. Maybe you lost your job altogether. Maybe you have not recovered from the devastation to the economy that COVID-19 did and continues to do. Maybe you need the services of the church at this time. Your church is here for you. Like Governor DeWine says, "We're in this together."

Others were not negatively affected financially. In fact, without anything to spend your money on, maybe you banked cash. At least one member that I know of sent in his stimulus check in and told us to share it with the staff who were hurting the most. That was so appreciated by them. So maybe this year you can plan to give more to the ministry of your church. Do that. One thing the pandemic has not stopped is inflation. Everything got a little more expensive this year for your church too.

When you watched that video of our VITA team members, I hope you saw that there was a real sense of passion, even emotion, for what they do. Among the four groups that we will hear from during this campaign, this one is the one I am least interested in – oh now, I mean no offense. I just couldn't care less about money and taxes and filing. I pay someone to do mine – I so don't care. But aren't we glad that there are people who are passionate and even emotional about taxes and helping people with their taxes.

I mentioned that Paul must have engaged the Philippians with genuine brotherly love. In the same spirit of brotherly love, Carol greets the clients with a warm greeting and gets them oriented to VITA, Art goes through very personal details of the client's life with sensitivity and confidentiality, and Kim greets everyone with her cheery smile and then checks over each filing and sends people away feeling very good about their experience at Zion.

And do you realize this? They do this ministry on our behalf for this community. Zion is vital to this community. It is important that we are here. Won't you please support the work of your church?

What the video was *not* about was filing taxes. What I hope you saw in the video was that same brotherly love that Paul employed to win over the Philippian Christians, used by those three to do what they do, using their spiritual gifts, faithfully, in service to their Lord Jesus, and for the sake of the people he loves. That is being good stewards of time and talent. And that they did their ministry of service during the pandemic isolation is inspiring.

Today we are also celebrating All Saints Sunday and this year we lost some great saints from our congregation; Audrey Guernsey and Pete Morrison to name just two. I didn't know them as long as some of you did, but they were mighty servants of the Lord doing their thing faithfully. Neither of them made a big deal out of their service, instead choosing the path of humility. In the Gospel Reading for today, Jesus our Lord said,

¹¹The greatest among you will be your servant. ¹²All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

I could not be more certain that Audrey and Pete are being exalted for their lives of humble service.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

So, my hope and prayer is that today's message and video inspires you. I hope it inspires you to do some self-examination. Are you using your spiritual gifts, and your time and talents to serve the Lord, perhaps through his church? If not, there is always time to find your place.

Having said that, I want to be very clear about this: We are still in a pandemic, and no one can decide your safe level of activity outside your home better than you. The three featured in the video today made a choice that was right for them. You do the same. This is an extraordinary time, but a great time for ordinary ministry. There are things you can do from the safety of your home, not the least of which is to pray:

- pray for the people of the world who are suffering from COVID-19;
- pray for a vaccine and end to the pandemic;
- pray for your country during this time of election;
- pray for the citizens of your country who have suffered from wildfires and hurricanes;
- and for your church and its ministries and those who do them that they continue to thrive.

Do this, and you will be "Faithful Amid the Fray."

I'll see you whenever you decide the time is right to return.

Prayer

Loving, merciful, and inspiring God, you have given your people all that we need to survive and thrive in the world you created. Help us to be generous with our time, talent, and treasure so that all the needs of all your people are met. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen