

Camille Cook Howe  
Georgetown Presbyterian Church  
Washington, D.C.

November 12<sup>th</sup>, 2023.  
Matthew 23:1-12  
Honorifics 101

*Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. 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 their 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. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father--the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor; the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.*

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.

November 5<sup>th</sup>, 2024. In less than a year, America will go to the polls and elect the next President. Campaign season is already well under way. For the next twelve months, there will be intense lobbying, rallying, and debating about who is the greatest, the best, or as kids like who argue, who is "the most smartest?" After living in DC through a few of these cycles of campaign, election, inauguration, I have learned some things. First, of all these elections really matter for our city, our jobs, and our economy. The elections have adjacent impacts on almost every industry in town like real estate, education, law, to name a few. The domino effect is huge. After each election people in our city and in our congregation directly gain or lose. And not down the road, as new laws are passed, or tax rates are set. People the next day get promotions or lose jobs. There aren't many cities where someone could legitimately say to their pastor, "Sorry, but I can't pledge yet because I need to see who gets elected President, so I know my finances." What happens on the Hill, impacts the lives of people who live in this city. If you don't live in Washington, it is a little hard to really understand that.

As a church that has been in this town longer than this town has been a town. We were established in 1780 and the district didn't come along until ten years later. This church has seen a few things. Our members have served as advisors to Presidents, Senators, Directors of Agencies, Attorney Generals, Secretary of Defense, policy writers and staffers and a million other important roles for our government and our military. We are proud of this connection, and it isn't a one-party connection. Therefore, since we aren't a one-party church, we must be intentional about our community particularly in election seasons.

And the second major thing I have observed about the campaign, election, inauguration cycle – is that the closer it gets to November 5<sup>th</sup>, 2024, the more people will be absolutely losing their minds and forgetting their manners. So we know that the election results have a direct impact on our church and its members and also that the election causes people to go absolutely crazy. The levels of suspicions increase, the badmouthing takes on new levels, the nasty infighting and elbow throwing becomes sport. And I wish I could say that the church is a sanctuary of pure Christian

civility and kindness but that hasn't always been the case. I want that to be the case, however. I want this to be truly a sanctuary from what happens on K Street, and Pennsylvania Avenue, and Capitol Hill.

I am a big fan of the show *Yellowstone* about the Dutton family ranch in Montana. In one of the episodes, the main cowboy, Rip is having an argument with his highly reactive girlfriend Beth Dutton. He is trying to invite her on a cattle drive trip, and she is arguing needlessly with him about whether he really wants her to go along or not. Finally, Rip says in frustration. "Beth let's put the crazy away. Would you like to go on the trip or not?"

"Let's put the crazy away." I wish I could have made *that* the sermon title. Now Jesus didn't speak like a cowboy, but he was willing to call out bad behavior when he saw it. In today's text, Jesus is talking to his disciples and also to the crowds that are listening in. Jesus just finished in the previous passage answering the question posed to him by the religious leaders, the scribes, and the Pharisees, about the greatest commandment. We know Jesus answered by saying, "Love God and love neighbor." And the next thing Jesus does is he talks about those religious leaders' bad behavior. It is as though they just left the room and Jesus, is like, "Let me tell you about those guys..." It seems like the only thing Jesus thinks that the religious leaders do right is read the scriptures. Jesus does not like how they jockey for the best seat in the room, how they seek fancy titles for their own self-promotion, how they wanted others to know all about their good deeds, and how they behave like they are holier than thou. This was what Jesus was preaching against today. If love of God and love of neighbor is the objective, then some of this other stuff just should not be happening.

Verse 23:5 says, "They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long." I love that passage because it is so specific and so condemning of a type of behavior that was not what Jesus was about. Phylacteries are little black boxes containing passages of scripture, attached to the arm or forehead with long leather straps. Fringes were added to the corners of the clothing. Orthodox Jews and rabbis still wear these, particularly during holy days. The fringes themselves and the phylacteries were not the problem for Jesus. Scripture tells us Jesus wore fringes on his clothing. The issue was how they were being used, they were making them broad and long to be highly visible. They wanted to be noticed, they wanted to be recognized, they wanted to be elevated. You've met these kinds of people. Maybe you've been this type of person. But this does not match the spirit of the law or the intentions of the scripture and fundamentally this is bad behavior. Jesus says, "Let's put the crazy away." Actually, Jesus said something even more startling, "*All who exalt themselves will be humbled.*"

With great seriousness, Jesus is preaching to his disciples and the crowds about embodying a posture of selflessness and humility – none of this bragging, self-promoting, and self-righteousness. Jesus is stripping away self-given titles of those who have tried to elevate themselves above others. You are not to be called rabbi for you are all students. You are not to be called father because your Father is in heaven. You are not to be called teachers because Jesus alone is the teacher. Author Rev. Tom Long in the Westminster Bible Commentary wrote, "Jesus is addressing here the dynamics of power in the Christian community. The issue is not titles per se, but styles of leadership and interaction. Today, some of God's humblest servants bear the titles, "rabbi," "father," "reverend," but it is certainly no guarantee of humility."

Styles of leadership and interaction – that is what I would like us to focus on in the year ahead. How are we leading in our spheres of influence and how are we interacting with others who we meet throughout our days? Are we taking on postures of humility? Are we making efforts to elevate others? Are we conscious about our actions matching our words? Do we show genuine concern for the people in our lives? Jesus was calling people out on their leadership styles and the ways they were interacting with others – as being non-reflective of God’s word and God’s will.

I wonder if we, Georgetown Presbyterian Church, as a Christian community, could think about the year ahead in a positive light. Maybe this could be a chance to actually grow as humble, faithful, spiritual servants of Jesus Christ and of God’s people? I mean we *could* follow the usual trajectory of becoming just more anxious, angry, and judgmental as the election approaches or we could try out something different.

After one of the election cycles, one of our church members sent an email out to his family. I was copied on this email. I have redacted a few parts of it, but I want you to listen for the posture in this email.

*Dear Family,*

*We are very proud of all of you. We regard that as a family we shared and enthusiastically supported the values of truth, decency, and concern for all people as the greatest gift you could possibly give us.*

*It seems now that our candidate will prevail and that is wonderful news. But win or lose, we in our hearts and minds supported our candidate for all the right reasons.*

*We are not gloating. Humility at this moment and going forward is important.*

*Love, Dad and Mom*

I have to say it was a nice email to read. It isn’t a letter that would make it into a newspaper because it wasn’t angry enough or self-righteous enough. It was just decent and humble – it felt like a Christian had written that email. Win or lose, can we, as a church, at least commit to being decent and humble? Because if we can’t do that then we really will not be walking in the footsteps of Jesus at all.

The country is going to ramp up, our city will go into overdrive, but we do not have to follow the obvious path that will be set out for us. Let’s follow the path of Jesus of Nazareth – a path that was paved with humility, and love, and virtue, and charity, and respect for others.

Kipling’s famous poem, *If*, says:  
*If you can talk with crowd and keep your virtue,  
or walk with Kings – nor lose the common touch,  
if you can wait and not be tired by waiting,  
or being lied about, don’t deal in lies,  
or being hated, don’t give way to hating...*

If you can do these things – if you can choose a different path, if you can embody a different way – then you’ll be a Christian. A Christian, in an election year, in Washington, D.C., in 2024! Some say we no longer exist; but that’s just not true – followers of Jesus will always exist, and I have met a few great ones along the way.

Thanks be to God. Amen.