

**The Lessons Appointed for  
Use on the  
Sunday closest to November 2**



**Proper 26**

**Year A**

**RCL**

1 Thessalonians 2:9-13

Psalm 43

Matthew 23:1-12

The Collect

**The Collect**

Almighty and merciful God, it is only by your gift that your faithful people offer you true and laudable service: Grant that we may run without stumbling to obtain your heavenly promises; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

AMEN

## 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13

You remember our labor and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and God also, how pure, upright, and blameless our conduct was toward you believers. As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children, urging and encouraging you and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers.

*Matthew 23:1-12*

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.”

## SERMON<sup>i</sup>

Last Sunday, I said:

**In early church writing, the church is often likened to a boat. Just as boats sail through water, the church sails through culture. Inevitably, accretions from the time and the culture through which the church sails attach themselves to the bottom of the church's boat like barnacles. It's the job of the priest or the rabbi or the minister, from time to time, to scrape the barnacles off her bottom.**

Culture inevitably makes its mark on the church, a mark that must, from time to time, be examined. If the marks culture has made are consistent with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we are to celebrate. If those marks are inconsistent, they must be scrapped away. We need to examine closely the barnacles our culture imposes upon the church, and the dangers they represent.

The barnacle I'd like to examine today is the one of

divided loyalties. We live in a world filled with secular pressures to be good Americans. We also have God's hand upon our hearts conforming us to be a Christian. We act as if the two are similar, or at least not hostile to each other. The truth is deeper and more uncomfortable than that. Take, for instance, the deep respect in which Americans hold hard work. Success through integrity and hard work is a maxim as American as anything you could imagine, but is it Biblical? Does it reflect the teachings of Christ? I would answer "No" to both questions. Here's what I wrote about this thoroughly American motto in the Preface to "A Lawyer's Tale".

**I don't think my childhood in the 1950's and 1960's, ... was substantially different from that experienced by most of my school-mates... Sundays, for most of us, was church day, whether we wanted to or not. ... In general, we went to Sunday School at First Presbyterian, where I learned useless things,**

such as how to color, and useful things, like the order of the books in the Bible. Following Sunday School, my brother and I would lobby for Dad's church, on the grounds that Brother Joe Faulkner would have us out by 11:30, whereas the Reverend Sam Curry at Mom's church could easily preach through a change of seasons.

I mention this, not to be critical of either pastor, who were both fine men, dedicated to their calling, but to emphasize the degree to which church was inflicted upon us as an obligation by our parents. The activities we were engaged in were mostly designed ... to produce decent, inoffensive children. Their tool of choice in this enterprise was stories of heaven, depicting it as a place where everyone wore nightgowns and played the harp, and stories of hell, which was depicted as a place of fire to which no sane child would willingly repair. One moved closer to hell by committing sins. One moved closer to heaven by doing good deeds.

I objected to this teaching because it seemed

**to me, even then, to be self-centered. If one did good deeds, not out of compassion for those in need, but as a means to benefit one's self in an afterlife, how was this more than a business transaction?**

N.T. Wright calls this view a 'works contract', and defines it in this way:

**The "works contract" functions in the popular mind like this. God told his human creatures to keep a moral code; their continuing life in the Garden of Eden depended on their keeping that code perfectly. Failure would incur the punishment of death. ... Humans were therefore heading for hell rather than heaven. Finally, however, Jesus obeyed this moral law perfectly and in his death paid the penalty on behalf of the rest of the human race. The overarching arrangement (the "works contract") between God and humans remained the same, but Jesus had done what was required.**

The works contract is certainly NOT the teaching of the Presbyterian church which insists that salvation is

an act of God, not something earned by works. Here's what the Presbyterian Church teaches:

**According to the Reformed tradition, who is saved and who is not is up to God and God alone. Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world. [S]alvation is understood to be “God’s activities in bringing humans into right relationship with God and with one another through Jesus Christ.” Salvation is purely of God’s choosing and has nothing to do with our “good works,” but rather with the faith God gives us. Even so, God elects us for service as well as for salvation. We may be called by God to a specific profession, to a particular act of service, or more generally to a way of life. The way one lives one’s life as a disciple of Jesus can be a service of God and others.<sup>1</sup>**

The idea that that one works one’s way to salvation by behaving correctly is a barnacle American culture has attached to the church because we value integrity and hard work so much. I confess that it might appeal to

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.pcusa.org/site\\_media/media/uploads/youngwomen/pdfs/nnpcw\\_reformedtradition.pdf](https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/youngwomen/pdfs/nnpcw_reformedtradition.pdf)

us on the grounds that it makes our salvation an act of our own will, the way one can will being a good American. Being a good American isn't necessarily inconsistent with being a Christian, but it's not the same thing. Suggesting that they **are** the same leads to divided loyalties, which must then be resolved, sometimes at dreadful cost. We don't like to think of it, but here are two examples from today's news.

This week we learned that Congress has approved a citation recognizing eleven brave West Virginia Soldiers who were killed 73 years ago defending their country at the Battle of the Bulge. Their sacrifice was ignored for those 73 years because they were black. All of us here grew up in an America that failed to see the wrong in that.

We also learned this week of a lonely young man, the son of a retired Marine, who contacted ISIS on his com-

puter and joined. To prove his loyalty, he killed his neighbor. He planned further attacks before his own father turned him in. Although it is too early to draw a conclusion, his preferred entertainment was violent shoot-em-ups on the computer. It's not surprising that he tried to bring the pleasure he felt from killing on screen into the real world. That's another American motto – a real man rides a horse and has a gun. The money says “In God we Trust” but our actions say, “In superior firepower we trust”. We need to examine the accretions we are presented in the balance scale of God's love.

This is not to say that being a Christian means turning your back on the traditions and laws that have so blessed us. As Christians, we are instructed to obey the law, so far as it is consistent with God's teaching.

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.

We are proud Americans. We do follow the law, for in that way we have maintained, for more than 200 years, a peaceful and prudent society. Nevertheless, in the event that the traditions or laws of our country conflict with our service as Christians, our first loyalty is to the voice of God within us which calls us to salvation and service. Heed it, for God will give you the strength and the faith you will need to fulfill your purpose. Lift up your calling and permit nothing to divide your loyalty to God's purpose for you.

AMEN

## BENEDICTION

At the beginning, I said, “Culture inevitably makes its mark on the church, a mark that must, from time to time, be examined.” I love my country, but I don’t confuse my love of country with God’s claim upon me. I pray that you don’t, either.

The Lord bless you and keep you;  
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;  
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

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*Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.*

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