“Monster Rehab”

Date: Oct. 30, 2011 Occasion: Halloween, All Saints Day
Place: Lakewood UMC Theme: Humility, Pride
Text: Matthew 23:1-12

Tomorrow is Halloween. For the last few weeks we have all been subjected to reruns of every scary movie ever made: zombies, vampires, guys in hockey masks, spooks with really long fingernails. Monsters in all sizes and shapes and forms, they’re all in fashion during the month of October.

It’s hardly surprising that, as usual, popular culture has gotten the point of “All Hallows Eve” all wrong. The whole culture seems to forget that the ultimate point is to celebrate “All Saints Day.” The monsters get center stage and all the glory, while the saints are left to clean up the popcorn and sticky soda on the theater floor.

But the Church has gotten this All Hallows Eve/All Saints holiday all wrong too. I’m afraid that we’ve been convinced that “monsters” are easy to identify. We think

monsters are weird, warped, obviously wicked, bent on murder, mayhem and mischief. But you know what? Outside of Hollywood monsters are not so easily identifiable.

A classic monster is a creature that takes the best of its qualities and uses them in a horribly wrong way. The amazing ability of bats to negotiate darkness by using sonic signals to hunt swiftly and silently, is made murderous by *the vampire!* The agility and intelligence, the strength and speed of the wolf are transformed into the terror of *the werewolf!*

What the movies miss, though, is that the worst kind of “monsters” don’t take life away in an instant. They suck away our souls, over time.

In today's gospel lesson, Jesus was preaching against "monsters," individuals who took those qualities that should have brought out the best in them, and yet they twisted those gifts into a misshapen, misinformed message. And Jesus offers them monster rehab.

Who but Jesus would see and point-out the misguided religious enthusiasm of the Pharisees. To the world, the Pharisees embodied piety and purity. They took the Torah seriously, so seriously that they committed their lives to analyzing every possible life situation that would be affected by the laws of Moses.

They labored to inject spiritual meaning into all everyday actions. The Pharisees insisted that the Sabbath be as separated as possible from the rest of the "work week." They carefully calculated and itemized tithes for all sorts of holy and helpful reasons. These are the folks who are in church whenever the doors are open, who give above and beyond what is expected, and who strive to be as faithful to God as possible.

You know, many of us would be glad to have them in our church. Why would Jesus criticize people who were taking their faith seriously? Good question. And yet, Jesus singled out their picky practice of faithfulness as an example of "bad faith."

By taking the best of intentions, the best qualities of piety and purity, and tying them to nitpicking legalism, the Pharisees became monsters. Their pride overwhelmed their piety. Their legal loads crushed simple faith.

But perhaps the most "monstrous" quality the Pharisees embodied was also the most human. They wanted to be "large and in charge." Recognized. Celebrated. Honored. Given the best seats at public events; given titles and special status. The Pharisees believed they were the "leaders" within their first-century Judaism.

Ah, that was the monster Jesus sought to slay. And he sought to slay the monster even among his own disciples - the eternal quest to try and make ourselves "godlike." Ever since Adam and Eve harvested the wrong crop in the Garden of Eden, "godlikeness" has been the most monstrous desire that has driven us all.

We lust for the best seats. We crave titles and recognition. Power, prestige, respect or reverence. Our "monstrous" side wants it all. You see, its not that the Pharisees were so unique and terrible as people. They are just like us. Or should I say, we are just like them.

The Church is no exception to this monstrous desire for godlikeness. Just as we have slipped up on what is truly monstrous, we have also slipped up on what makes for a saint. November 1st is the Church's celebration of All Saints Day. We will recognize that holiday next Sunday. But let's ask ourselves, who is a Saint?

Even in the Protestant church, we immediately think of those who stood up tall and walked tall before persecution. The apostles, who preached Christ in front of hostile crowds were leaders in forming the faith communities that would become the church. Early church theologians, mystics, martyrs, and miracle workers - they are all crowned with the title of sainthood.

Interestingly, that is *not* what Jesus was looking for. Jesus did not call for great leaders. In fact, in today's gospel text, Jesus rejects any special titles among his disciples. There are to be no "rabbis," no "fathers," no "instructors." Hear that in 21st century language. There are to be no "reverends," no "bishops," no "doctors or professors." Ouch! This text is stepping on my toes, and I feel the pinch.

Instead, Jesus calls for a community of what? Of servants! Of humble people. Jesus didn't call a quorum of board members. Jesus called disciples. And there was only one main qualification for becoming a disciple. Only one.

Jesus demanded, “Follow me.” Not lead. Follow. Not “go into all the world and make leaders,” but “go into all the world and make disciples.” Don’t aspire to be large and in charge. Rather, seek to be humble and a servant. Don’t claim any title and try to make a name for yourself. But accept the one teacher, the one true Father, the one Messiah, as the One and only authority.

Jesus did not collect resumes, or sift out from a list those who were most gifted at handling people or dealing with administrative details. Jesus invites his disciples in the first century, and in the 21st century, to do nothing more than “follow him.”

Jesus is the leader. We are his followers. Jesus is the one who is “large and in charge.” We know this, don’t we? That’s why our Conference, our literature, our study groups are all about celebrating our identity as followers. Right? NOT! Not at all. We couldn’t be closer to 1st century Phariseeism if we tried!

Put together a conference on leadership and see how many come. Now, put together a conference on “followership” and see how many show up. Almost every seminar I look at any more is all about how to create great LEADERS! You know, rabbis, fathers, teachers, folks who are large and in charge.

But that is not who Jesus was looking for. Maybe we need to learn to play a game we stopped playing in the schoolyard. It was called “Follow the leader,” a game not about leading, but about following. Being a true “follower” of Jesus is every much as humbling today as it was in first century Palestine.

Jesus is still calling us, not to be little gods, but to follow the One true God, the Messiah, who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. We are called to a life of humility, not to a life of pride, based on how well we follow the details of a rigorous religious program, like the Pharisees did. We are to follow the one who

embodied love.

One of the best stories of humility that I know, is that of a man who arrived in 1953 at the Chicago railroad station to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. He stepped off the train, a tall man with bushy hair and big mustache. As the cameras flashed and city officials approached with outstretched hands to meet him, he thanked them politely.

Then, he asked to be excused for a minute. He walked through the crowd to the side of an elderly black woman, struggling with two large suitcases. He picked them up, smiled, and escorted her to the bus, helped her get on, and wished her a safe journey. Then, Albert Schweitzer turned to the crowd and apologized for keeping them waiting.

It is reported that one member of the reception committee told a reporter, “that’s the first time I ever saw a sermon walking.”

Beloved in Christ, Jesus offers Monster Rehab to the Pharisees. He offers it to you and me as well. We are not called to be great in the eyes of the world. We are simply called to follow Jesus, and to walk humbly with our God. Amen? Amen!