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Proper 23 (A) ~ 11 October 2026
St. Dunstan's, Bethesda
Philippians 4:4-9
Psalm 106:1-5
Matthew 22:1-14

“Whatever”

We all know that, as Christians, we are meant to pattern our lives on the example of Jesus, particularly with regard to *humility*. We are called to do our spiritual and psychological work, to strive for such ego health that we do not need to rely on others' praise or affirmation for our own sense of self.

All good. The world does not need more arrogant, self-important Christians.

Well...

If you ever feel as though you need help cultivating a spirit of humility, I have the solution for you: Just spend a couple of hours – it won't even take a full day – in the presence of Middle Schoolers.

You will be knocked down a few pegs really quickly.

Trust me; I've spent a lot of years in Middle School classrooms.

Now, just to be clear: I *love* this age. I would not have chosen to teach seventh and eighth grade, on purpose, if I didn't. Among their other fine traits, Middle Schoolers tend to be brutally honest. It's difficult to be too puffed up around them. They will call you on it in a heartbeat – as they should.

Think of it as a learning lab for humility.

If you don't have any Middle Schoolers in your life, ask a friend or partner to sub in for one. Here's what they need to do: When you venture an opinion – say,

about what you want to have for dinner or what show you'd like to binge on Netflix – tell them to roll their eyes, shrug their shoulders, sigh, and say

WHAT-ever...

with as much apathy as they can muster.

You can't really feel too self-important when met with that response.

Can we practice it together? Let's say it, on three: One, two, three...

WHAT-ever.

Good job. I am getting the disdain from here. Well done.

I'll stop picking on my beloved Middle Schoolers now, because the truth is that that age group does *not* have a monopoly on the ability to make other people feel small.

I imagine we all experience it from time-to-time. Perhaps more than just from time-to-time.

That sense of not being seen, of being dismissed. That feeling that our thoughts and opinions don't really matter. That *we* don't matter.

It's one thing to try to live one's life as humbly as possible. It's quite another to be actively diminished by an individual or group.

That is out-and-out painful.

And the truth is that, intentionally or not, each of us is capable of giving as good as we get. We can be dismissive and disdainful of others, too.

Ask yourself, *How often am I impatient with other people? How often do I cut them off when they are speaking, redirecting the conversation to myself? How many times do I fail*

to listen — really listen — to the person standing in front of me? How frequently am I rude to a server, an employee, a stranger?

In other words, *How often do I communicate, without even saying it, WHAT-ever?*

Now, contrast all that with the way that St. Paul uses the word “whatever” in his Letter to the Philippians:

Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable...

Do you hear the difference? Let’s practice it together, on three: One, two, three...

What-EV-er!

When Paul says “whatever,” his tone is expansive, and inclusive. The sky’s the limit. There are no bounds to the extent to which we are to pursue truth, honor, justice, etc.

There can never be enough of any of these goods in the world.

Keep on doing these things, Paul says. Keep being patient, keep listening, keep honoring the friend, the neighbor, the stranger.

Never stop, because this is how the Kingdom of God will be built...one brick at a time.

I am reminded of Jesus’ Parable of the Lost Sheep. I bet you know it. The Pharisees and the scribes have come to Jesus, grumbling that He eats with so-called “sinners.” Listen to how Jesus responds:

Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on

his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my lost sheep’” (Lk. 15:4-6).

Be persistent, Jesus says. Be accepting. Keep inviting. Keep making room at the Table.

Or, as Paul says, *whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable...*

Do these things. Over and over and over. To the best of your ability as imperfect humans who get tired, and frustrated, and grumpy. We do lose our patience, and our tempers.

Nevertheless, we are to keep on trying – even when we fail. Even when we’re tired, or discouraged, because the world does not always understand the abundant inclusivity and hospitality of Jesus.

That’s the point of that difficult Gospel we just heard, the parable about the guests at the wedding banquet. It sounds so harsh, doesn’t it? But imagine the story from the host’s perspective:

The king invites the people to a feast for his son, but they will not come. They turn their backs. They reject his graciousness. They take his love for granted. They roll their eyes and shrug their shoulders and sigh. We can hear the disdain: *WHAT-ever*.

We all know that the world can be a harsh place for the good-hearted, the generous, the kind, the sincere, and the humble. Too often they are drowned out by the competitive and arrogant, the cutting and dismissive, the intolerant and hurtful.

We humans can be a selfish and egotistical lot.

Yet as Christians, we are called to try to rise above what we might call our “primal” tendencies and become “what-EV-er” people in a “WHAT-ever” world.

Because we *need* more expansiveness and inclusivity, more hospitality and graciousness – perhaps now more than ever.

It seems to me that the charge from St. Paul’s Letter to the Philippians might well be our mission during this challenging and, at points, frightening, time in the history of our country. This mission is, of course, aspirational, because – in all our humanity – we are not always joyful. Or gentle. Or thankful. Or, Lord knows, peaceful. These are active choices. We must remind ourselves – again and again and again – that God is faithful, even when we can’t be. Even when others let us down. Even when we let God down.

As the old saying goes, “Fake it ‘til you make it!” Perhaps if we repeat Paul’s words often enough, like a healing mantra, they will begin to bear fruit in the fullness of God’s time.

This is the essence of the Gospel, isn’t it? It is the Good News that Jesus teaches and preaches and models for us – all the way to the cross.

Friends, learning to become “what-EV-er” people in a “WHAT-ever” world is difficult work. It can be discouraging. We may be hurt, at points.

Nevertheless, we must keep trying (with God’s constant, abiding help). The stakes are too high. We have to continue building the Kingdom of God...one brick at a time.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the[se] things..., and the God of peace will be with you.

Amen.