



ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

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A New Order

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, September 23, 2012

The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

Based on Mark 9:30-37

"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

Of all the things at which we might imagine Jesus being highly successful—authoring a self-help book is not on the list. His message was too hard, too direct, too true to get published, much less make it to the bestseller list. *Ten Easy Ways to Be Last* or *The Seven Habits of Suffering Servants*? I don't think so; the titles just would not look good on the display table.

Not surprisingly, the disciples had difficulty hearing what he had to say. And in that wonderfully human way known to all of us, when the hearing got too difficult, they just tuned out. Our gospel passage opens with Jesus predicting his death. This was a concept his followers simply could not accept. Messiahs did not die; they delivered. So they stopped listening and did what any group of up-and-coming powerbrokers would—they began to argue about who of them would be the greatest. We shake our head and mutter about how thoroughly they missed the point, but really whom are we kidding? We understand that process.

When Jesus realized what was going on, he did something so endearing that it is worth pointing out. He didn't brush them off or berate them; he didn't rush on to his next appointment. He sat down before them. When a rabbi sat, that meant more than he was just tired. It meant, "We need to talk." I am so grateful that he did not give up on them. His willingness to stay in the conversation heartens me, suggesting that the spiritual journey is never a one-off moment but a long process of being converted. Thank God for that. I need it to be long.

This hierarchical jockeying was not new to Jesus any more than it is to us. While it is certainly normal in that it is normative, it is not God's way. When Jesus began to speak to them, he made the extraordinary claim he had made before: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." It's a great slogan; but if I am totally honest, I have to say that I get tired of even trying to get my head around that. No wonder the disciples zoned out. It so thoroughly defies the basics of their culture and ours that I don't know how to accommodate it realistically in my life. We are programmed to want to be first—politely so in our circles (at least on the outside) but urgently nonetheless. God knows the church has no claim on selflessness. In fact as any reader of history knows, the church wrote the book on self-promotion and is filled with all manner of machinations for power. And, yet, if we are to make any truly significant sense out of what it means to follow Jesus, we have to grapple with these words today as though Jesus has just said them to us. They capture the essence of his message.

To pound home his point, Jesus used a visual aide—in this case a real, live human one. "Then he took a little child in his arms," the scripture says, and "said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.'" Before an imposing crowd of onlookers, Jesus took a kid, probably covered in kid dirt of one kind or another—maybe she had a runny nose or maybe he was whining because he was hungry. Jesus said, "You want to be in the kingdom of heaven? Then be like this child." With incredulity, these disciples, so desirous of being important, looked at this child and must have wondered how it could be that one with so little clout, one so totally dependent and utterly submissive to adult rules, could represent all the power and the glory of the kingdom of God.

For me this scene of Jesus with a kid bouncing on his knee is an—maybe even the—iconic moment in the ministry of Jesus. My heart tells me that the Christ of the Universe still calls us to live by that example—no matter how unlikely it seems. It is heartening to imagine what the church would be like if its iconic image was a runny-nosed kid on Jesus' knee rather than a powerful group of largely white men, fighting over who is first. Jesus was not being

sentimental when he held the child. Well, maybe a little; it is hard not to be sentimental. Regardless, he was making a strong political and spiritual claim about his view of the world, about what the realm of God is about. Although the disciples were unable to understand all of the ramifications of such a statement, they were with it enough to know that on this one he was “way out there.” For in those few words he had radically reversed the order of what was held as truth. I would not be surprised if at that moment the disciples might have begun to believe that in fact he might be wild enough, radical enough, to get himself killed, that maybe his going on about all that really was prophetic after all.

What on earth do we do with all of this? What does a culture intent upon finding personal happiness do with a Messiah who makes such outlandish statements as these: “The first must be last”; “You must be a servant of all”; “To know me you must welcome a child like this.” And these are ones just from today’s gospel. Is it all finally just church talk or are we willing to try genuinely to become imitators of this radically disempowered way of being? I don’t know if I am; I hope so. Living that way does not come naturally to me, and my sense is it doesn’t for any of us. But I have a few thoughts about some efforts in that direction.

We could begin by taking a serious moral inventory of what is enough and what is too much. If we would do that, I believe that we would be amazed at the excesses of our lives. Why do we need so much of everything when most people in the world do not have enough? We give lip service to the notion of simplicity—it’s actually quite hip now to talk about simplicity. But living simply does not mean living with simply the best; it means, I think, living with a little less. Are we willing to even think about that?

We could begin to question the extent to which we so casually accept the hierarchy all around us. If we are on the top of the pile—in our jobs, our relationships, our investments—what would it look like if we refused to relate to people vertically? Who says that relating to one another on the basis of the organizational chart is the only acceptable way of behaving with one another at work? Why can’t we experiment with little reversals that more nearly reflect this gospel story?

Over and over, I am reminded that life here on this earth is short. I don’t want to give so much of life to the A’s of our culture: achievement, affluence, and appearance. In my heart of hearts, I want to focus on another A word, one that Jesus used: abundance. A special kind of abundance. Abundance that comes from living and loving, from talking and listening, from crying and laughing, from sharing and creating, from serving and giving. I want that because I know that the world’s way to personal happiness just doesn’t work. Evidence for that can be found all around us, and, yet, we keep trying to fill our lives with one more thing or achievement that will finally make us happy.

As luck would have it, we have our own little examples of hope and newness and restoration—our baptizands today. The Christ of our faith calls us to a new way: to a life of servanthood, of giving ourselves away—not as resigned or, worse, self-righteous martyrs—but as joyful and spontaneous children of God. Is it realistic to believe that any of us can really know this way? Maybe, maybe not. I honestly don’t know. But I surely hope so—for my sake and for your sake and for the sake of the world. We are about to baptize some little kids. Imagine them as the ones who have the keys to the kingdom.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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