



# ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

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## The parade is not the circus

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, June 30, 2013*

*The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost*

*Based on Luke 9:51-62*

The story is told of a little boy who lived out in the country around the time that the nineteenth century turned into the twentieth century. He had never seen a circus. And the circus was coming to his town on Saturday. He asked his father for permission to go and his dad said that he could, providing his chores were done early. Saturday morning came and the chores were finished. The boy asked his father for some money for the circus. His dad reached deep down in his overalls and pulled out a dollar bill to pay the admission and give him a little change to spend at the circus. It was the most money the boy had ever seen at one time. Off the little wide-eyed fellow went. As he approached the town, he saw people lining the streets. Peering through the line at one point, he got his first glimpse of the Circus parade. There were exotic people, animals in cages, painted wagons and marching bands. Finally, a clown was seen bringing up the rear of the parade. The little boy was so excited that he almost forgot the dollar but when the clown passed, he reached in his pocket and handed him the precious bill. Thinking he had seen the circus the little boy turned around and went home. He told his father all about the beautiful wagons, the exotic people, the bands, the animals and the clown bringing up the rear. The father looked puzzled and asked the boy about the tents, the three rings, the high wire acts and the magicians. The boy reported seeing none of these and it was then the father realized the boy had mistaken the circus parade for the circus.

In the passage that was read from Luke's Gospel this morning we are told that Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusalem." This phrase represents a rhetorical turning point in Luke's Gospel. Before this point Jesus was wandering around the countryside teaching and performing miracles. Now he is determined to go to Jerusalem, and we know what will happen there. Immediately this act of self-definition and differentiation separates Jesus from the hospitality of the Samaritans.

The important thing to note here is that Jesus was not afraid to be self-defined and take his self-defining message to religious authorities in Jerusalem, even knowing what awaited him there. He did not seem to be surprised that his message would bring about opposition. He preached and practiced the love of God, and yet his message that all were God's children was not well received. He even rebuked the disciples when they offered to call down fire from heaven upon the Samaritans who refused them hospitality.

I have always wondered about this story. In the first place I never knew the disciples to command fire before or after asking this question. And, furthermore we have no record of Jesus ever commanding fire to come down and consume anyone . . . this is the guy who teaches us to love our enemies and do good to those who seek to do us harm. One could hardly imagine Jesus of Nazareth calling down fire on his enemies, even on a really bad day.

Jesus was passionate about his faith in the love of God and his belief that the love of God could transform everything: people, situations, societies, powers and principalities. Jesus was a poor Jew living in Palestine under Roman occupation. The apostle Paul was also a Jew but unlike Jesus he was a Roman citizen. Howard Thurman, one of the great African American preachers of the 20th Century, said that the difference is that, "If a Roman soldier in a prison was taking advantage of Paul he could make an appeal directly to Caesar. There was always available to him a protection guaranteed by the state and respected by the minions of the state. It was like a magic formula always available in emergencies." On the other hand Thurman notes that, "Jesus was not a Roman citizen. He was not protected by the normal guarantees of citizenship—that quiet sense of security which comes from knowing that you belong and the general climate of confidence which belonging inspires. If a Roman

soldier pushed Jesus into a ditch, he could not appeal to Caesar; he would be just another Jew in the ditch.”

Thurman goes on to note: “It is to the credit of the amazing power of Jesus over the life of Paul that there is only one recorded instance in which he used his privilege.” And yet the privilege shows up again and again in the letters of Paul.

Thurman tells of reading to his grandmother who had been born a slave on the McGhee plantation near Madison, Florida. In spite of not being able to read or write, his grandmother was always very particular about the Scripture she would have him read to her. “Devotional Psalms, some of Isaiah, the gospels again and again,” but never the letters of Paul. As he grew older with great temerity he asked her why she did not request the letters of Paul. She told him that, “During the days of slavery the master’s minister would occasionally hold services for the slaves. Old man McGhee was so mean, she said, that he would not let a Negro minister preach to his slaves. Always the white minister used as his text something from Paul. At least three or four times a year he used as a text, ‘Slaves, be obedient to them that are your masters . . . as unto Christ.’ Then he would go on to show how it was God’s will that we were slaves and how, if we were good and happy slaves, God would bless us. One day, she said after hearing one of those sermons, “I promised my Maker that if I ever learned to read and if freedom ever came, I would not read that part of the Bible again.”

Although allowing that there are other passages in Paul’s writings, the simple fact of the matter is that the privilege and position that Paul enjoyed was guaranteed by the integrity of the state, and it shows. That is why it is not surprising, then, to hear Paul tell slaves to obey their masters like Christ. It is not surprising to hear Paul reinforce societal norms in regard to the inferior place occupied by women and gay and lesbian people in his society, and it is not surprising to hear him say that all government is ordained of God. All government? Paul may have been transformed by Jesus, but like mine, his transformation was not yet complete. Paul was protected by the guarantees of citizenship—that quiet sense of security which comes from knowing that you belong and the general climate of confidence which belonging inspires. But Jesus was not.

Jesus made no concessions to the authorities, and he expected his followers to do the same. He calls us to live and to love large and not to worry that the message we preach will upset people, people in authority, people who would kill him and even us. We are not to worry about where we will live, what we will eat or what we will wear. We are to focus on preaching the liberating love of God, and bringing good news to the poor.

Now we live in a great country that allows us to advocate without fear for the rights of all people, and later this week we will celebrate our freedom. But we must not let our great privilege temper our will to fight for justice and freedom for all people. This week, as supporters of marriage equality celebrate the Supreme Court decisions that overturned DOMA and Prop 8, we must not forget the people who live in 37 of the 50 United States where there is no right to marriage equality. We will not forget to fight for the rights of the people who are disenfranchised by the ruling on the Voting Rights Act. We must fight for fair comprehensive reform of the immigration laws. We will insure that all women have easy access to the wide range of family planning services. We must fight the causes of the growing inequality of wealth that plagues this great country and keeps so many people poor. For as Nelson Mandela once said, “To be free is not merely to cast off one’s own chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.”

And so today let us celebrate our victories with a glorious parade, but let us not forget that the parade is not the circus. The parade and in fact the entire long road toward freedom will not end until God’s rule is established. When in the words of Isaiah, “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them . . . They will not hurt or destroy on all the holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”

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