

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller
The Twenty-First Sunday After Pentecost
18 October 2015

Scripture readings: Isaiah 53:4-12 Psalm 91:9-16 Hebrews 5:1-10 Mark 10:35-45

Well, the boys are at it again this morning, and aren't they embarrassing! James and John, the sons of Zebedee, their line sounds just like ours doesn't it? *"I want you to do for me what I ask, God. I'll tell you what to do and you pay up."* It's really not much different from our prayer life. We let God know what we want, and then we walk around and tell people, *"God answered my prayers"* - meaning we got what we wanted - or *"God isn't listening to me"* because I didn't get what I want.

We're just as embarrassing as they are. Do you know how embarrassing this story really is? There's a parallel to this story in the Gospel of Matthew. And it is so embarrassing that the writer of Matthew puts the question to Jesus about James and John sitting at Jesus' right and left hand in heaven in the mouth of their mother. Only a mother could ask that kind of question of God. *"My son, the doctor."* [laughter] *"My son, sitting next to God in Heaven. My son, better than everybody else's son."* Not much has changed in 2,000 years, has it?

Can we talk? I went to the Diocesan Confirmation Service last night at St. Luke's in Scranton which was packed for a change, from wall to wall, front to back, with confirmands and people being received in the Diocese from all over. It was really quite impressive. The church in Jim Thorpe had two pews full of people that were being received and confirmed.

But, friends - and this isn't a criticism of this tradition alone. Let's look at ourselves for the last 2,000 years. You get a bunch of Christians together like that, you know who's boss. [laughter] You know who's close to the throne. They hold a stick. And you know who's important. Their dresses are different colors - purple. And you know who gets closer and closer to authority and power-brokering and to the throne which is moved into the center. Who carries the candles? Who carries the cross? Who carries the book? And the information is clear: That kind of structure in the Church - and it's no different for any other group, whether or not they're liturgical - we organize ourselves as human beings this way, and we do it not only as a church, but as a nation. What's all the stuff in the news about presidential campaigns? It's going to be who gets the power. Who's closest to the power? When the power goes to one person, who's been the most helpful to get the person there? Who gets the handout afterwards? Who is sitting closest to God? Who is on the right and who is on the left? And I'm sure there's a difference between right and left. You all understand nineteenth century table etiquette. The guest of honor always sits on the right hand of the hostess...or is it the left?

In the early Church we get this Book of Hebrews. The reading today from Hebrews is an attempt to understand Jesus as the high priest, an understanding to put Jesus into the power structures known to the Church of its day and say, *"Well, that's what makes Jesus important"*

because he functions as the high priest which means those who are closer to him have more power, those who are closer to him have more affection...and that his job is to do the praying for the little people who can hardly pray for themselves because they don't know the right prayers, they don't wear the right clothing, they don't have the right headgear, they don't carry the big stick." Do you get it?

We still do this, and it's still as embarrassing. We participate in it. I understand that we as human beings have to organize ourselves to get stuff done because if we all just did our own thing and didn't work together chaos would really be intimately known by all of us in a short time. However, our theologies, our ways of thinking about God and each other, need constantly, it seems to me, to be scrutinized. What becomes important to me as we consider this text...Look at Hebrews. It says this extraordinary stuff: *"He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward since he himself is subject to weakness."* That's an extraordinary statement about Jesus as high priest. *"And because of this he must offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people. And one does not presume to take honor unless it's given by God."* The priest's job is to pray for the people. Well, this kind of organization of the Body of Christ, the Church, got so out of hand, and still does today, but at the time of the Reformation people had to think about this and ideas developed and people thought about what it means to be a baptized Christian and the idea emerged - and it's often credited to Martin Luther - I'm not sure it is his idea alone - but the idea emerged that all people who are baptized are members of the priesthood. Wow! All members of the Church have a responsibility to pray for everybody else, all who are ignorant and wayward, and, by the way, to admit that we are the first among the ignorant and the wayward and that it is not by our association with power or our closeness to the honcho in the middle but by God's closeness to us, all of us are asked by God to exercise priesthood.

Now that's particularly challenging for some traditions which won't baptize folks until they're adults when they can make up their mind and choose and join the community and participate without failure - because if you fail, you get kicked out of the community - choose to be baptized because you can make a statement of faith.

I have fallen in love with the business of baptizing infants because I'm never sure I'm much more of anything other than an infant myself when it comes to the business of faith in the Church. God, in the sacrament of the Church, looks at this tiny ball of flesh and blood in a soiled diaper and says, *"Here is a priest of the Church. Here is a member of my body. Here is the object of my affection and through and by and with this human being is the only way my love can be known, received, and shared in this world."*

So if you want to draw close to God, draw close to another human being no matter what her or his condition or situation in life or headgear or outfit or elected position. None of it matters in terms of the priesthood of Christ. The Book of Hebrews is fascinating because they want to take Jesus... Did you ever see the movie *Gandhi*? Do you remember what he dressed like at the very beginning of the film when he was kicked off of the train? He was dressed like a British lawyer: bowler, umbrella, formal clothes. Along the line he decided it was important for people in India to make their own cloth instead of buying it from somewhere else and started to spin cloth and wear the cloth that he made as his garments, referred to rather arrogantly by the British officials as *"a little brown man in a diaper"* - the British probably said *"nappy"* -

making the point that his vesture had something to do with justice, with the poor, with people being called by God to rule their own lives and country, to organize their own society.

If you get a chance and you can turn to PBS tonight and watch an edition of Indian Summers - the plot is so complicated. Don't ask me what it is about, but what comes across in ten minutes is the arrogance of the British Raj - the complete dissociation from the people who live there, dissociation from the cultures, from the languages, from the societies and its imposition of authority from thousands of miles away who cart in their bedsteads and their jam jars and their servants and their white gloves. There is complete disassociation from the realities of the people who live there. And I see the Book of Hebrews as trying to make Jesus a part of the British Raj, into a part of the priesthood of the Church and the religious traditions that were inherited in his day rather than the person who really disassembles, takes apart, all of it and says, *"The priesthood belongs to the people and the work of the priest is the people's."* And what is that work essentially? It is to speak with God in prayer and to share the message that God gives with the world. And that is our job from the moment of baptism, and it is a job that is constantly being learned. It is a job for which no one is ever truly, sufficiently, and completely ordained. It is a job which is mutually ours together.

What James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who are a part of the inner circle, want apparently has nothing to do either with speaking with God or with sharing good news with others. They're looking at their sad selves in a mirror and saying, *"How can I get ahead of the pack? How can I not only succeed but how can I oppress? How can I have more power than others? How can I fill myself with greater pride, power, authority, better outfits, more sticks, more hats, more...yuk, so that when people gather to worship God they might make a mistake and worship me instead."*

And Jesus' message is: *Worship God in other people, but make sure that it's first the poor, first the downtrodden, first the unjustly treated, first the needy, first the widow, first the orphan, first the immigrant, first those whom it would be easier to ignore, and first those who apparently have not a darn thing to give you in return - except gratitude for the love of God which you have shared with them which, as we grow in faith, know isn't ours but God's. And we are the communicator and channel of that, just as we have received that through the communicators and channels of it who shared it with us.*

In a treatise which Martin Luther wrote called *The Freedom of the Christian Man*, he talks about the business of a Christian is the business of liberty, to be free and subject to no one, and at the same time the business of a Christian person is to be a slave in service to all. And the business of being enslaved willingly to others is the business of freely accepting what baptism shares with us freely, the simple fact that you, you little bag of bones in a soiled diaper, are in fact... It doesn't take us much longer in life to return to diapers. Anybody ever hear of Depends? *[laughter]* That you, you pants-soiling bunch of human beings, are in fact, the object of God's love - purely, simply, fully, completely. And if you are wasting your time trying to make God love you, you are barking up the wrong tree.

It's time to wake up, folks, and believe that you, in fact, are the object of God's full, complete, unwarranted, salvific love...*comma*...and so is everyone else in the world...*period*. And

together we are *all* invited into a priesthood. I'm willing to go even further than baptism in terms of that invitation. I believe all of us who are baptized by that squeezed broken water in the birth canal who come into this world are, in fact, the object of God's love and the priests of the world. And so it is our job is simple: to talk to God and to share the message. Oh, you can't hear God very well? She's not doing what you're demanding? Well then, we have a sacrament, and so if you can't hear God, here we can smell God, taste God, ingest God.

You know, Luther said, "*The Word and the preaching of the Word is as much of a sacrament as the sacrament at the altar because it goes into us and it changes us from the inside out.*" So God, it seems to me...and that's why we gather as the Church...desperately wants to be known by us. And God sincerely wants to share her power with all of us. And just as I was desperate with my mother to know which of the four of us was the favorite, I think God provides us all with the same answer: "*You're **all** my favorite!*"

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.