

Sermon for Sunday, November 5, 2017
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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There are few words more disturbing to someone like me
than those of Jesus
recorded in the twenty-third chapter of the gospel according to St Matthew.

Any one
who has ever enjoyed
processing round in brocade vestments,
or getting to sit up front at special events, or have people defer to them simply because of
their title,
would be suspect if they didn't cringe just a little bit
at Jesus's words
about religious professionals.

Don't call yourself teacher, don't call yourself Father, don't take honors on yourself. The
greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and
all who humble themselves will be exalted.

They are troubling words, not just because they bring into question
the place and behavior of those of us who are clergy, but because they strike at the root of
the very way our society is ordered.

We live
in a world of hierarchy.
It structures our government, it is the model for our business, and it inevitably
flows over
into the church.

Down at the bottom
are the vast majority of people, going about their business, doing what they are told.
Then there are the middle layers, people who take orders and translate them for the
masses. Layers on layers, each one, a you go up, with a little more power, a little more
authority. Until finally, at the top, there is the leader, the one who controls things, the
boss.

And so in government, we the people
are at the bottom. Then there are layers of government, local and county and state and
finally national, and sitting at the top, the president and congress. The hierarchy is
somewhat modified – the judiciary provides a mechanism for review and counter

balance, and the people at the bottom have certain power through voting and lobbying. But all the same, its essentially a hierarchy.

And the same is true of business. There are the workers at the bottom, then middle management, and then the board and CEO at the top.

And then there's the church. Like government, like business, the church tends to be structured as a hierarchy: the people in the pews at the bottom, then the vestry, then the priests over them, then the bishops and diocesan structures over them, and above them all, the presiding bishop and the national church.

But if the greatest are to be the least, and the humble to be exalted, if we are not to be like the Pharisees who delight in titles, then what are we to be like?

In Australia, there is something called the “tall poppy syndrome.”

Imagine a field, full of poppies. Most of them are regulation height, but just a few have dared to reach higher towards the sun. Those poppies might be beautiful, they might even be stronger, but they disrupt the uniform pattern of flowers. And so someone comes and trims them, evens up the heights, so everything looks the same.

The “tall poppy syndrome” is that tendency to cut down those who stand out, those who are different, those who are leaders, so that everyone is the same, and no one leads or dominates.

Is that what Jesus is talking about?

I don't think so. Because the opposite of hierarchy is not uniformity but equality. And uniformity and equality are very different things.

Hierarchy
is when some people
are considered more important, more valuable than others,
when individuality is okay for those up higher, but conformity is considered best
for those at the bottom.

Uniformity
is when everyone is the same, when difference
is a cause for alarm, and individuality
is a “bad thing.”

Equality
is when everyone

has equal value, everyone is honored,
 where individuality
 is the gift we bring
 to the community.

The picture Jesus gives us
 is not of hierarchy, not of uniformity, but of equality.
 The church
 is a community
 of equals.

The only criteria of membership
 is baptism. All who are baptized
 are welcome, all who are baptized
 are called
 to work together
 for the work of God.

That's why
 the church changed the rules on receiving communion.

There used to be a kind of hierarchy of membership. First there was baptism, when you were welcomed into the body of Christ. But to get communion, it was like there was another level, confirmation, and so we ended up with a two tiered system, baptized on the bottom, confirmed above that. And then, of course, you added ordination on the top. And so we ended up with a hierarchy, even within a single parish like this.

But if we take Jesus's words seriously, if you take seriously the church as a community of equals, then the only thing necessary for belonging is baptism. Confirmation is not a second step, but an adult decision to take on for yourself the vows which were made on your behalf. But baptism is all it requires to belong to God's church. All of us who are baptized are equally members, and members of a community of equals.

So what does that mean in practice?

A community of equals means that each and every one of you is an important member of the church, a member of Christ's body. It means we need each and every one of you, and the gifts you bring to us. And so, in this season of stewardship we have been asking you to commit yourself to this community this coming year, in terms of money, and in terms of the gifts you can offer.

A community of equals means that our children are not just future members, not just members-in-training, but full members.

Kennedy
who we will baptize this morning
will be as much a member as Marge
or Jennifer
or Frank.

A community of equals means that all are welcome to speak out. Vestry meetings are public – anyone can attend.

A community of equals means that we work hard at including newcomers in our midst. We try to reach out and develop new friendships here, and support one another in prayer. And we work hard at communication, so that everyone knows things, and knowledge doesn't become a way of making some people more important than others.

And a community of equals leaves the clergy in the same place as all the rest of you. Right in the middle of the church.

We are not raised up on some sort of pedestal; we don't belong to some other order of humanity; we are not infallible.

Ordination, I believe, is not primarily about position, or status, or power. Those things sometimes get attached to it, but they are not the heart of it. Ordained ministry is a vocation, a calling, a matching up of gifts and time and need. I have been set apart as one among you. Clergy are paid, because we need to live in order to exercise the calling and gifts we have been given. But that doesn't make us more important, just more accountable.

There are some decisions that clergy have to make, according to the laws of the church, and there are some that clergy make because we went to seminary and got taught how to make them.

But most of the decisions we make, we make in consultation with parishioners, the vestry, and so on. We are in this together, a community of equals.

You might remember the picture the apostle Paul gives us in his first letter to the Corinthians. There he describes the church as a body, with hands and fingers and feet and toes and hearts and muscles and blood and a nose.

Every member of the body, every member of this community has gifts, and is called to use them for the good of the whole body of Christ. Some of us might be hands, some vocal chords, some heart, some feet. Some of us are good at gardening, some of us are gifted singers, some of us are good at caring, some of us are good with finances, some of us can preach. Each of those gifts are important for the life of the whole body, the church. Each of them are necessary. Each of us has something we can bring to the community of faith. We need one another, all of us, so that we can truly live into our calling

as the body of Christ, the people of God, a community of equals with Christ in our midst, where all are important, all belong.