

Sermon for 17 October 2021 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost/Laity Sunday

Scriptures: Job 38:1-7, 34-41; Psalm 104:1-9, 24,35c; Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 10:35-45

***“Serf”***

Laity Sunday.

I’ve never stirred up much interest for that, here @ Bethesda. In my early years here, we had two active lay teachers on the district: Charles Melchior and Buck Whiteman were both licensed and taught classes, and usually they would speak at the sermon time; but they’ve let their licenses expire and haven’t come forward for years.

The rest of us seem content to leave the worship order and speaking duties to the preacher and the liturgists, who are unusually capable and generous with their time at Bethesda, to “run things.”

I want you to reflect on the meaning of this day, this year. It basically asserts that no one is in charge, and everyone is in charge, in this household of faith, this part of the risen body of Christ. We each have our duties... we’re Methodists, very organized ... but each boss has specific, limited territory of authority, outlined in our Book of Discipline and voted on every four years at General Conference.

In this kind of set-up, there are all sorts of reasons for not taking initiative; but if you know something needs doing, none of them is any excuse. If you see something needs doing, you either do it, or pray that it will get done until it does. God gives every one of us the authority and the capacity to work on something, and the call to do so.

What I see at Bethesda is ... dear God, help me say this right! ...a lot of unused power. It’s been very comfortable to work in such a setting ... lots of tolerance, a few people doing essential things so the boat keeps floating ... but a lack of joy and satisfaction in the over-all effect.

Let me try to specify. If we count them up, we do a lot of important things, from running an honest, cheerful show to making a real difference in some small but essential ways. Nobody gets lost here. Their troubles and their delights get seen and heard, and the beautiful gift of being prayed over is never far from any of us. Day care, sick folks, another congregation, and now the FOCUS group teaching people how to repair and handle computers ... along with volunteers and donations to food pantries down the street and across town at the Church for the Deaf, and books for prisoners, and school supplies for Hamilton Elementary-Middle School, plus birthday cards to missionaries, and apportionments to local and world-wide church programs,

all get our support, as well as contributions to our six annual United Methodist special Sunday offerings, and collections for Red Bird Mission's centennial celebration .... That's not a short list. Neither is the fact that we have been among the churches in our denomination who openly declare support for LGBTQ people and concerns. I'm never "down" when time comes to write an annual report for our District Superintendent.

So what's missing? Certainly not our handsome demonstration during CoVid, of continuing regular worship and all our standard support system for the causes mentioned above, or our pastoral support ... I mean in the sense of the whole body supporting anyone sick or in troubled or who looks in on our fellowship any Sunday or at any special service.... All throughout this awful and enduring pandemic.

Look at the funny word I chose for my sermon title: "Serf." Jesus is teaching his close friends how to do better about using power. In the first place, two of them have been caught arguing which among them is the greatest ... however you want to interpret that. When the rest hear that, the trouble grows. Jesus hears about that, and dictates very clearly, "whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. That's what I'm doing. "  
*(freely translated)*

Does that mean we're not to love ourselves? I don't see that. "Love your neighbor as yourself," the Jews taught and Jesus repeated over and over in his parables and acts.

I think it means we're to see everything bound so tight together that there's no boundary between you and me, or me and the Russians and Chinese, or all those people who, as far as I can see, are just put here on earth to give me a hard time.

Life gets complicated. Religion is complicated; but if the last two centuries of scientific discovery have proved anything, it's that what happens on the other side of the earth matters to me; how I vote counts; what I do with my energy and money makes a difference; and, to be specific about these last few years, we've gotten more selfish and controlling than ever, with all our education, and inventions, and that word, "POWER."

I think Jesus is talking about power. I think God's talking to Job about power. "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?" Job has wanted to hear God ... which, as his story works out, God thinks is reasonable ... and the answer is, we're not in charge. Mystery is basic to human experience. Modern science makes that even more clear than it used to be for our ancestors; But ... and here is my point: We DO have power. We have incredible influence ... and our historical moment is shining light on more we

can and should do as power-holding creatures. Not only that: To hold power is to hold it for others ... Jesus says it harshly .... To be their slave.

I think he's insisting every talent we have, every drive and resource we possess, everything that turns us on, is a call to equality and enjoyment together. It's more fun to make others better off than to go off on our own. And if Bethesda is doing well NOW, that shows it knows how to make a living improving others' chances. There's no reason to pass up fresh occasions to shine the light. We may be almost 100 years young as a congregation ... but these days, people are still driving @ that age, safely!

"Serf" is for emphasis. Really THINK about our call to create opportunities for others to do better and to have a better life. Figure out how to make politics safer and happier. Listen to Bishop Peggy Johnson and her partner, Mary Johnson, in how they're living in harmony with creation and the love of God in Christ. That family we helped two years back, Patty and Eddy Fury ... Bishop Peggy says they need help again .... I went out and delivered them a check last week, and let's add to that; Think and pray and talk about how enterprising we can be as a little old church that isn't dead yet ... Use our power as though we were slaves of others, because that's what sells ... that's the bright side of capitalism ... that's what Jesus is telling his best friends. The woods are full of examples of people doing just that kind of thing, many of them in Christ's name. Let's take notes, and talk about it, and get moving. The exercise will do our joints good ... and we will have more say in where we land next, in this time when NOBODY knows whose job will last, or how faith will shine best, or church interpretation of scripture will turn out at some new surprise.

Does that make sense? Dear God, turn it into sense for us, no matter how I've said it.

In Jesus' name,

Amen.