

## **Homily – Climbing Down the Ladder**

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**September 19, 2021 – St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church**

Our grandson, Carter, is two-years old. Though he and his family live up in the Seattle area, Jeff and I are blessed to be able to have a video dinner with Carter. We do this two or three time a week. The smart phone with its camera is placed in front of Carter, out of his reach. We chat with his parents and watch Carter eat while we eat our own dinners. In addition, every day we see new pictures and videos of Carter and I have noticed that when he is at school or day care his eating is very neat. When we have video dinner Carter's eating is very messy. He frequently throws food and willfully tosses his cup to the floor. If cleanliness is next to godliness then this childlike behavior is not good. But he is still very precious. We join with many of you as we dote on our grandchild.

Not every child is adored, and a young child is the very picture of vulnerability. In some cultures, children are socially invisible. In others, they're legally unprotected. Here in the United States, children routinely suffer the catastrophic effects of lax gun laws, cruel immigration policies, unaffordable healthcare, underfunded schools, and racist violence. In all cultures, children are at the mercy of those who are older, bigger, and stronger.

To better understand today's Gospel reading it is important to understand the place of children in Jesus' context. Two thousand years ago, children were adored but they also had no standing or status. They were a nobody. Anything could and was done to a child. In some ways a slave had more status or protection. Children were the lowest of the low. So when Jesus places a child in their midst, he is not being cute or sentimental. Instead, he is giving the disciples a visual cue to go along with his words. In the Gospel reading we heard these words from Jesus. "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

This is still a profound message for us today. I hope it is not new news to you, but Jesus was uncompromising in his belief that all human beings were equal in dignity and worth. He treated the blind, the lame, the sick, the outcasts, and the beggars with as much respect as that given to those of high rank and status. He refused to consider women and children as unimportant or inferior. This turned a carefully ordered society of status and honor upside down—even more so when he advocated moving down the social ladder instead of striving to reach the top.

This image of the powerless child is the portrait Jesus offers of God. In the divine economy, power and prestige accrue as we consent to be little, to be vulnerable, to be invisible, to be low. We gain greatness not by muscling others out of our way, but by serving them, empathizing with them, and sacrificing ourselves for their well-being. Whatever human hierarchies and rankings we cling to, Jesus upends them all as he holds a tiny child in his arms. Do we want to see God in this child? Do we really want to see God? Then look to the child abandoned in the alleyway. Look to the child detained at our border. Look to the child who has been molested. Look to the child who is fleeing from war. Look to the least of these, and see the face of God.

Now I want to acknowledge that this message from Jesus about the first shall be last, this is not a message that is congruent with twenty-first century America. Instead, we tend to value the accumulation of more and more stuff, more and more power, more and more control. Our American ideal is the self-made, self-sufficient, autonomous individual who stands by himself or herself, not needing anyone else. This perfect American is not beholden to anyone for anything. This is the ideal that many live and work for. It is their goal in life, and they will sacrifice anything to achieve it. There have been plenty of people in the past with inflated egos—kings, conquerors, and other dictators—but in the Western world today the cultivation of the ego is seen as the ideal for everyone. Individualism permeates almost everything we do. It is a basic assumption. It is like a cult. We worship the ego.

Many of you know that I spent twenty years working for some large multi-national U.S. corporations, and one of the things that bothered me the most about corporate life was my unending desire to climb the corporate ladder. I wanted the promotion. I wanted the next higher title. My ego wanted more responsibility. The curious thing was that my desire to climb the corporate ladder was making me miserable. I was envious of those who got more attention from senior management, and that was directly at odds with the values I had as a Christian. Personal integrity is the alignment of one's actions to one's values. And, when integrity becomes misaligned then it dampens a healthy sense of self. So, to improve my integrity I either had to change my values or change my actions. I chose to change my actions and to entirely let go of the corporate ladder.

The great fourteenth century Dominican mystic Meister Eckhart said, "God is not found in the soul by adding anything, but by a process of subtraction." True spiritual wisdom reveals that less is more. Jesus taught this, and throughout history in one way or another the holy ones always discover it. Less is more. First is last. Up is down.

Last week Matt preached about the upward mobility that permeates American society and the downward mobility of Jesus. Upward mobility is the way of the ego

and it is a life focused on personal freedom and the accumulation of stuff. It is climbing the ladder in life to have more and more. In contrast, downward mobility is the way of Jesus. It is about humility and letting go of stuff and releasing control. It is about serving others and climbing down the ladder of life.

Sit back and picture in your mind's eye millions of individual ladders that are reaching up. The cover of your bulletin has four such ladders, but picture thousands and millions of ladders reaching up into the sky. And, now picture each ladder with a person on it, and each person is climbing. Some are climbing up their ladder faster than others. Some are struggling as they climb. Now in your mind's eye picture one person who is climbing down their individual ladder. Less is more. First is last. Up is down. Jesus is the one who is climbing down his ladder while everyone else is still struggling to climb up. As followers of Jesus we believe that he leads us in the right direction. Jesus leads us to healthy living. He leads us toward God. He leads us to eternal life. So some reverse direction and start to climb down the ladder in the same way that Jesus is climbing down. And, then in your mind's eye, picture that more and more people start to climb down the ladder and follow Jesus towards God. Do you want to stop climbing and turn to follow Jesus down the ladder?

If you do, then here is this week's practical advice to follow Jesus. We cannot become humble merely with our intellect or willpower. Pretending to be humble only makes us more self-absorbed and self-referential. Instead, all we can really do is become more aware of our pride or vanity by noticing how we respond to even minor slights or humiliations. That will be more than enough to let us know how self-centered we are and how meaningless our taking offense truly is in this infinite universe. So this week, be mindful of your thoughts, actions and motivations. Are they congruent with your values of humility?

One of the most central and amazing truths about Christianity is that God became a helpless human infant. In this week's Gospel story, Jesus underscores that stunning truth with another: all children represent God's heart, God's likeness, God's power. To welcome a child is to welcome the divine. To choose vulnerability is to be great in the kingdom of God. To cultivate childlikeness is to cultivate godliness. Except when the child, our grandson Carter, is defiantly throwing his food to the floor. Be that as it may, follow Jesus and climb down the ladder towards God.