

Episcopal Church

Proper 18 (A)

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A Sermon by

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“Nobodies In Charge”

DRAFT

The Holy Gospel according to

Matthew 18:15-20

“If your brother or sister sins against you, go and point out the fault when the

two of you are alone. If you are listened to, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If that person refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church, and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on

earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

Dear Lord, may we be forgiven as we have been forgiven by you. Amen.

Several years ago, thirty members of the Council of Associated Parishes for Liturgy and Mission held their annual meeting in Cuernavaca, Mexico. Their subject matter was culture and social justice, and so they arranged for a

workshop of liberation theology and its local expression in Cuernavaca.

On a hot April afternoon they were led across the tracks to a slum of unimaginable squalor. A sea of cardboard huts put together with billboards and paper scraps steamed in the heat, its dirt streets lined with open sewers. The visitors met members of the local grass roots Christian community at their homes, splitting up into small groups and visiting four or five shacks

then coming together at sunset at one of the largest huts.

There, Pilar, a tiny, thin woman in her fifties, looking prematurely in her sixties, welcomed the group graciously, inquired what they were about and shared with them her experience as the leader of the local grass roots community.

The day was ending and they asked her to lead them in Evening Prayer. She blushed, admitting that she couldn't read. They didn't relent, and she was a leader

–they knew it, she knew it–they would be happy to pray with her any way she thought best.

She rose masterfully to the challenge, teaching them a short song, and then asked for someone to tell a story from the Bible. Through interpreters, she led a conversation about the meaning of the world. All this she did naturally, effortlessly, as if he had been born to do it, with unmistakable aplomb and authority, all the time looking thin and weak, and prematurely aged.

After Evening Prayer, she offered some cold sodas — a welcome relief from the heat. The visitors looked at each other half embarrassed, and asked her how she had known that they would visit her and chilled so many bottles ahead of time. “Oh no,” she confessed, “I did not know you were coming. I try to keep about a case of soda cold to sell to the kids when they pass by on their way home from school. This way I have a little money to help my neighbor, Luisa, who is disabled.”

An astonished hush fell upon the guests, and one of them thought, “from the mouths of children you have elicited praise.” For several weeks now we have been hearing Matthew describe the Christian community as a kingdom, a country, a community, a picnic at which everyone is fed, open to all, not just Jews but Canaanite women, foreigners, as well. It is a society made up of the strangest people, and in the passage just before today’s, Jesus declares that its greatest members are children. The

disciples ask, who will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? Jesus answers by putting a child in front of them: “unless you turn and become like children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

This was not nice of Jesus. It was insulting in his time for an adult to be compared to a child. Saying that the Reign of Heaven was a Reign of children was like saying (which he did) that it was also a society of destitute beggars:

unclean, degraded, expendable people;
nobodies.

This is such a distasteful insight that the church has from time to time, sanitized it in order to make it a little more palatable. Early on, the Reign of the Nobodies was understood to be a society of celibate men and women, sexless and without gender differentiation, like children.

Later the phrase came to mean a kingdom of those who have been born

again; a Reign of the Baptized. Later – down to our own day– we understand it to mean a Reign of the Innocent and Pure, strangely distorting the original meaning: a Reign of Undesirables.

And yet for Jesus these people are supremely important. “anyone who is an obstacle to bring down any of these little ones would better be drowned....” “if your hand causes you to sin cut it off....” “See that you do not despise any of these little ones....” They are like lost sheep for which the shepherd is willing to leave

behind the flock. “It is never the will of the Father in heaven that any of these little ones be lost.”

Why would it be so important to stress that the Christian community is a Reign of Nobodies? To stress that the person in leadership (Peter) cannot stay afloat; that leaders like Peter may be an obstacle to Jesus’ mission? (“get behind me satan”) –that the community is endowed by God with real authority to bind and loose; that the suffering of Jesus –his journey to Jerusalem to die

there for confronting the power of the Temple— is necessary and essential to the character of the Christian People; and in today's reading, that the way to resolve conflict is by bringing people to listen to the community of nobodies?

Perhaps when you joined this church, you thought there would be some social advantage in belonging. There are several influential people from our town (city, neighborhood) here. Perhaps you thought you would be belonging to a select group of good people —people who

are talented, generous, smart, committed, upright, devoted, giving. Imagine how easily you could follow today's reading and listen to these good Christians whom you admire and respect. Imagine how well you could learn to mold your life on theirs, to be led by them and their virtues into an ever-growing and-improving sense of your own worth. Imagine how perfect such a community would be, how desirable. But now, as I read the following words from Paul, I invite you to look around at the people who are gathered here with you:

“Remember who you were when God called you: How many of you were educated in the usual sense of that word? How many of you were influential or upper class? No. It was to embarrass the smart that God chose people who are not terribly smart by human standards, and to shame those who are powerful that God chose people who are weak by human standards.”

“Those whom the world considers common and contemptible are the ones God has chosen. God has chosen people

who are nobodies in order to expose people who think they are somebody.” (1 Co. 1:26 – 29).

Now think again: Do you want to belong to a community in which when you disagree with each other and don't make up, you will be brought before common and contemptible people and they will decide what you should do?

What do you mean, the people sitting around you are not common and contemptible? It says right here that they

are! Or have we forgotten to go out and bring in the people who are supposed to be the core of this community? Where are the beggars, the homeless, the prostitutes and adulterers, the lepers and the nobodies that are the real authority in this Church? We forgot about them! Can we be the true church without them? Can we be the true body of the Risen Christ when we are all upright, smart, responsible and middle class? Where are the little ones? Where are the people we usually avoid?

As Matthew put it in chapter 25, at the end of time it will be these people who will judge us, for they are Jesus. And to be faithful to Jesus, we must add immediately that these hungry, naked, dirty, uneducated, suspicious people who populate the edges of our lives will also say to us with Jesus, “who accuses you? — Neither did I accuse you.”

Pilar understood this, and here she found her authority, she found that she is God’s daughter in whom God is well pleased, and from that treasure, she discovered her talent, generosity,

intelligence, commitment, uprightness,
devotion, leadership.

And here she also found her love for her guests: for instead of censoring and wagging a finger at them for being first world capitalists, she welcomed us to her shack in the desert of her slum, gathered us, and fed us.

Now let us go and do the same. Amen.

Description: We are community, worldwide and town by town. As we see in each other the spirit of Christ, so shall we send that Spirit out to others in love, forgiving as we have been forgiven by Christ our Lord.

Tags: Kingdom, Mexico, community, forgiven, forgive, love