

Humble Servants

“The greatest among you must be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; but whoever humbles himself will be exalted” (Matthew 23:12)

Today’s gospel reading is a study in contrasts – between those who have power and those who have none; between those at the **top** of the social ladder and those at the **bottom**; between those who lighten the burden of others and those who add to the burden of others.

During the American Revolution, a rider on horseback came across a squad of soldiers who were trying to move a heavy piece of timber. The rider noticed a well-dressed corporal standing by, giving lordly commands to “heave.” But the timber was a little too heavy for the squad to move.

“Why don’t you help them?” asked the quiet man on the horse, addressing the important man in charge.

“Me? Why, I’m a corporal, sir!”

Dismounting, the stranger carefully took his place with the soldiers. He smiled at them and said, “Now, all together, boys – heave!” The big piece of timber slid into place. The stranger mounted his horse and then addressed the corporal.

“The next time you have a heavy timber for your men to handle, corporal, send for the commander-in-chief.”

It was then that the corporal and his men first realized that the helpful stranger was none other than George Washington.

The corporal, full of himself, brought down a few pegs by the soon to be first president of the United States, experienced what Jesus warns us about in today’s gospel

from **Matthew** – “*Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, but whoever humbles himself will be exalted*”.

In this gospel reading, admittedly not a favorite for most of us, Jesus is once again angry at the scribes and Pharisees for their hypocrisy-- the obvious disconnect between what they are saying and what they are doing. Preoccupied with their own importance, distracted by trivial concerns like the ornamentation on their garments, these first century religious leaders are failing miserably in ministering to the Jewish people. Rather than leading inspirational lives based on the golden rule; rather than trying to alleviate the suffering of the many, these privileged few are aggravating that suffering... in violation of God’s law and covenants. Centuries earlier, they were doing the same sorts of things that the prophet Malachi denounces in the first reading.

A famous orchestra conductor was once asked which musical instrument he considered most difficult to play. His reply -- “second fiddle!” How true, especially today when so many in our country appear to be afflicted with narcissism, a fancy name for self love, and with its close cousin, elitism. Extremists among these folks apparently prize *rugged* individualism to the point where they become indifferent to the plight of the less fortunate. For them “pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps” translates to disdain for people who don’t or who can’t... for whatever reason. “Looking out for “number one” seemingly dries up their capacity to feel compassion for those who struggle in life.

Some of these self-righteous folks label people who disagree with them —“bleeding hearts.” Certain ones in leadership positions even seem to delight in

pandering to our baser instincts, rather than appealing to our higher angels, for example, on current hot buttons issues like gun control and immigration reform.

In stark contrast to humankind's natural tendency toward self-centeredness, Jesus epitomizes the opposite -- selflessness. Why? Because excessive love of self diminishes capacity to love others. The bigger the head, you see, the smaller the heart. And to be his disciple requires a big heart, indeed... yes, sometimes even a heart that seems to bleed for others. That's why for him it's the *lowly* who rank highest in the kingdom of God, not the privileged. Why in the Beatitudes, it's the meek who will inherit the earth, not the haughty.

Rather than touting his own greatness, Jesus exemplifies *humility*. At the Last Supper on the night before he dies, he, the Son of God, kneels down and washes the disciples' feet telling them: "*...I have given you a model to follow... as this is done for you, so you must do for one another.*" Elsewhere in Scripture he says: "*I come to serve, not to be served.*" ..."*Whoever serves me must follow me and where I am there also my servant will be.*" "*As the Father has sent me, so I send you.*" "*What you do for the least of my brothers and sisters, you do for me.*" And in today's gospel, "*The greatest among you must be your servant.*" In short, Jesus personifies what he expects us to be -- "humble servants." And, for the vast majority of us, that is not an easy role to play. Is it?

Throughout the New Testament by word and example, Jesus demonstrates that love of and service to others is synonymous. In the divine scheme of things, the measure of a good life isn't how many servants you have, it's how many people you

serve and greatness lies not in trying to *be* somebody, but in trying to *help* somebody.

For people of faith, therefore, serving others with humility, especially those outside our comfort zone, isn't optional, it's mandatory. In fact, it's *the* primary way we obey Jesus' command: "*Love one another as I have loved you.*"

Felice Leonardo "Leo" Buscaglia, also known as "Dr Love," who died in 1998, was a popular author and motivational speaker. A modern day "apostle of love," Buscaglia used to tell a story about a man he sat next to on a transcontinental flight who complained during the entire trip. The flight attendants were useless, the food terrible, the seating cramped, the movie lousy. Then the man sank his teeth into larger issues: the government was corrupt, society rotten, welfare recipients scamming the system, the courts coddling criminals and on and on!

As an aside, I preached this homily at the Monroe County Correctional Facility on Thursday evening and, not only did the inmates not know who Leo Buscaglia was, but they certainly didn't agree on the coddling criminals part!

During the conversation, Buscaglia mentioned that his life work was the study and enhancement of love. The man snapped to attention. "That's great! What the world needs is more love," he assured Buscaglia. Then, without skipping a beat the man added, "It's a good thing that there are still people like you and me who understand that."

Like the scribes and Pharisees in today's gospel and in the first reading from Malachi, the man on the flight didn't practice what he preached. He, like they,

“talked the talk,” but didn’t “walk the walk.” Humble servants, in short, they were not...which leads me to this concluding and disconcerting question...

When on Judgment Day you and I meet the Lord on the other side of eternity, what will the verdict be? Exalted? or Humbled?

Anthony J. Sciolino

Malachi 1:14b-2-2b, 8-10; 1 Thessalonians 2:7b-9, 13; Matthew 23:1-12.

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time. October 30, 2011 (Cycle A)