

Proper 21A, 2017
Church of the Holy Trinity, Middletown CT

The Bible begins by telling us that we are all made in the image of God. Then the rest of the Bible story helps us to understand just who God is and what it might mean to behave as those made in God's image. Last week in the parable about the landowner we learned that God is both generous and inclusive in ways we might find quite annoying. This week St. Paul holds up the example of Jesus, God in human form, to challenge the Philippian Christians to act as Jesus did.

Paul describes Jesus by quoting an early Christian hymn when he says, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited [or better translated: as something to be grasped], but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness."

There are two words in this passage which have become key to Christians in understanding God and our own calling. The first is *kenosis*, emptying one's self. That is the positive action which we should imitate. And the negative action—that which Jesus refused—was grasping. This word in the Greek comes from a root verb which means "to seize, especially by an open display of force." To grasp something.

There is one thing I have learned about birds which I find helpful here. I always wondered why birds did not fall off their perches at night while they slept. The answer is because bird feet are at rest when they are clutching. A bird has to use its muscles to open its foot. (Therefore, when sleeping, they naturally grip their perch.) Now human beings were created differently. The natural, relaxed position for our hands is to be open. We have to use our muscles to close our hands. For us, grasping something takes extra energy.

Think about it. Grasping, holding on to money or material things takes an enormous amount of continued effort. Just try clenching your fist in a grasping way and holding it like that until the end of this sermon and see how your hand feels, then. Likewise, holding on tight to emotional things—like holding a grudge—also takes a lot of energy. It just does not occur to us that perhaps the reason for this is because we were created to let go, not to grasp.

Jesus let go. He emptied himself. He poured himself out, taking the form of a servant. Jesus shows us that we, who have been made in the image of a generous God, would find it much easier to let go, to open our hands, to empty ourselves.

If you go to the Holy Land you can learn some interesting things from your tour guide about the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. The Sea of Galilee is full of fish and life because it takes water in at one end and lets it go at the other end—emptying into the Jordan River. The Dead Sea, on the other hand, has no life in it whatsoever because it takes water in but does not give it away. It is literally a “dead end.” Jesus’ example echoes that truth for us: by choosing not to grasp but to let go we enter into the life-giving, life-sustaining ways of God. That is the image of God after which we are challenged to live.

Time and again Jesus tells his disciples parables which illustrate God’s ways, God’s kingdom. Just think about the parable of the Prodigal Son. Remember that when the father in that story welcomed back his wandering son he called his servant and ordered the servant to bring his best ring, his best robe, and all the best food so they could have a really big party? Well, notice that the servant had free access to all the best that the Father had. The servant was entrusted with literally everything of value in the household. The servant was the steward who had been entrusted to care for all of that.

We are like that servant. Think about what God entrusts to our care. Look around you here at all the friends in Christ and the beautiful building with which we have been entrusted. Look at the children in our midst—each one given into our care. We baptized them, promising to do all in our power to support them in their life in Christ. God trusts us to do that. And look at one another and remember all of the gifts and skills each of you brings to our common life. We are stewards of all the best God has to offer.

And most of all, God has entrusted us to be the stewards of the Gospel, the Good News. We who know we have been made in the image of God are God's representatives, ambassadors in the world. We are called to imitate the generous God in whose image we are made, not grasping but emptying ourselves, and all that we are, and all that we have—giving it all away for the life of God's kingdom.

You all may think that serving on a committee is pretty ho-hum, and that meetings are a bore. Well, you have not seen a meeting of the Outreach Committee. There is nothing more joyful, more satisfying, more fulfilling than giving. The Outreach Committee, working on behalf of the parish, has the privilege of recommending to the Vestry the disposition of parish outreach funds. Giving money away is thrilling. God wants us all—not just the Outreach Committee--to experience the joy and the excitement of being stewards of the Gospel and stewards of all that God has given us.

When we choose not to grasp, but to let go of God's generous gifts—to keep them in circulation—we are participating in the life-giving and life-sustaining flow of the Kingdom of God. We are claiming our Godliness by becoming the loving and giving stewards God has created us to be.

-- The Rev. Dana L. Campbell, Interim Rector