

SERMON, September 24, 2007-; Proper #20, Fr. Robert McCloskey

To be better than somebody else seems to have been the personal goal of Jesus' contemporaries. Commentators suggest that his culture was particularly plagued by this obsession. Whether or not our own culture is so obsessed I'll leave to you - but it seems to have been the case in Jesus' day. So it is that the disciples argue amongst themselves about their relative merit - who was better? who was best? They did not have benefit of today's passage from James which clearly and practically defines true wisdom. They also did not have the hindsight of the New Testament writers, looking back through the lens of Jesus' death and resurrection as past event to make sense of his teachings. Nor did they comprehend Jesus' second warning in today's gospel passage about his coming passion and death. That's certainly not how to be the best.

Instead we have individual disciples scrambling to establish their own importance to the detriment of their fellow disciples. I do not wish to psychoanalyze the disciples - I am not trained in that, and I think that there has been far too much of that in recent years. I *can* draw upon my own experience of living within and growing up in a family where oneupsmanship and being better than somebody else was part of the fabric of life. And I can say with some confidence that the game of being better or best comes out of an inner self-image, of not feeling competent, not feeling worthy, not feeling satisfied with one's self. - We call it poor self-image.

So the disciples vying for position is a thing which I personally understand. Clearly they found it difficult to feel that they were accepted for who they were. They thought that they had to fight for position, for importance. The point in my own life when the foolishness of this behavior in a spiritual context hit home, was long before I became immersed in the theology of Paul Tillich in seminary. As some of you may recall he is my favorite theologian, the one I call the 'real St. Paul' and the basis for my own theological foundations. But before tackling his 3 volume Systematic Theology, I encountered collections of his chapel sermons edited into several books. In one of these "*The Shaking of the Foundations*", is a sermon entitled "You are Accepted". That sermon has had a profound impact on an incredible number of readers and listeners, myself included. In it Tillich simply lays out the fact that we are each accepted by God as we are. No need for one-upmanship.

Its effect on me was to realize that much of my upbringing was off the mark. The game of 'being better than' is a terminal illness. It also provoked me to dig deeper into the synthesis of culture, behavioral science and theology which Tillich excelled in putting together. Whenever I hear gospel stories about the disciples trying to outdo each other I am reminded of these things. I would go further and say that most of the driven, career-obsessed individuals I have known, carry within themselves the unresolved issues of acceptance and poor self-image. I don't need to tell you this. There are scores of books on the subject. On the other hand I am not refuting the responsibility to use the gifts which God has given each of us.

So what does Jesus say to all of this? He places a young child in their midst. Young children are innocent, spontaneous, uneducated and a delight to interact with. It is no secret that I have a special affection for infants and young children. One of the joys of parish ministry for me was to serve 3 of my 5 rectorships in parishes with day schools as part of their mission. When I lefty St. Mary of the Hills in January, 1982, I became rector of the largest parish in the Diocese of Long Island, which had a sizeable Day School. Sharing the daily chapel services with my three priest colleagues was for me a wonderful ministry. One day I was leading chapel for a group of pre-schoolers. We had a delightful time sitting on the carpeted floor and discussing a Bible story. When it was over and the children had left, a member of my altar guild who had

been working in an adjacent room, cornered me and launched a strong criticism of my chapel behavior. Why had I lowered myself to the children's level? Why did I speak on their level? Why didn't I raise their sights to my adult leadership and move them beyond childishness? I simply replied that we had a difference of opinion on this matter. [Secretly I thought to myself, perhaps she would have preferred that I deliver a treatise on the doctrine of the Trinity to them, and then I thought, God help her own grandchildren.

However, that is not why Jesus takes the child in this instance. He is not calling the disciples to a child-like purity of life. Remember that he is dealing with the disciples striving for position, oneupsmanship, "I'm better than you are." Jesus points to the child and in effect says to the guarded, self-protected disciples: ***'become vulnerable like this child - become defenseless - let your guard down - exchange power grabbing for helplessness.*** It's not a message the disciples wanted to hear and it's not a message which plays well in our culture. That is why the religious right has become so aggressive. Vulnerability contradicts absolutism, self-righteousness, and re-writing the laws for our own power grabbing. Meekness is a far cry from what we have heard from Washington in recent years. "The little child is lost in the crowd of militancy and religious apocalypticism defining policy. But then we need go further than our own Episcopal Church and Anglican Communion to see these ugly forces at work, big time at the present moment. Oneupsmanship writ large. Vulnerability is not very popular right now: which is to say that the compassion of Jesus is not being preached as much as it should be.

Taking up the cross in last Sunday's gospel has become a battle cry rather than an invitation to compassion and vulnerability. Yet Jesus continues to place children in our midst - figuratively and actually - and invites us to learn from who they are. The call to the Church and to us individually and personally is to embrace the child - to find the vulnerability which disarms fear and hostility - to put down the personal defense and shouting - and to accept who we are. In that welcoming we welcome Jesus and the God whose love and compassion he reveals. In that non-competitive, non-protective state of mind we are capable of living the wisdom from above of which James speaks this morning: *pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality and hypocrisy.*

None of us can or should set out to master all of that as a spiritual exercise or challenge. Rather, when we accept the child, the vulnerable within ourselves, such things begin to happen. That's a message, a gospel, which the world needs to hear - but the Church needs to hear it, too. The discipleship of vulnerability is today's gospel call to each of us. The alternative is not a pretty picture: it is the lesson we heard from Wisdom today [which is also a lesson for Good Friday]. The alternative is continued human crucifixion at the hands of those who have to be better...lest their own inadequacy be exposed.

God has given us a great gift. God has given us the vulnerable in whom we can discover our own vulnerabilities, if we reach out and encounter them. Children, the poor, the dispossessed, scapegoats, people of other cultures, races and faiths or no faith. In my last parish in Coconut Grove, Miami, I took my daily morning exercise walk along the shore of Biscayne Bay. Many of the local homeless lived there under the trees by the water's edge, and I got to know them well. They began showing up at church regularly and the parish developed a ministry to them. Whenever I found myself caught up in the trivia of parish administration and politics, I knew exactly what to do. I would go and talk to the homeless, because in their vulnerability I was able to recall who I was as a Christian and what my ministry was all about. - The vulnerable, reaching out in order to find our own vulnerability and our own souls. Dare we do that? Or do we prefer to play the pretend game of power and oneupsmanship? AMEN.