

Greatness redefined

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Lynn C. Sanders, Associate Rector,
at the nine o'clock service, September 20, 2009: the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost.
Based on James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a and Mark 9:30-37*

It's this way every year. Have you noticed? In the last two weeks, before and after Labor Day, there's a dramatic change in the city. I've noticed it as I try to make my way on the sidewalks, on the subways, even in the far reaches of Central Park—which are usually empty. There are suddenly lots of people here. There are suddenly *not* lots of cabs. In two weeks, I've seen only one available cab, and it stopped for someone else before it got to me. I think, as I do every year at this time, where did all these people come from?

We're back into the rhythm of the school year, or "program year" as churches call it. Our culture as a whole runs on this rhythm. Among these crowds of people, particularly in the early morning and mid-afternoon I see parents and children walking purposefully to school, sagging under the weight of new backpacks.

Even at St. Bart's, with our 52 equal Sundays and great music and classes year-round, even we notice a shift. The intensity ratchets up when September comes.

We had several days of holy chaos a week ago as the last of the basement cleanout items went out the door, the ailing elevator got repaired, and the halls freshly painted and floors polished for preschool opening—all within a few days.

Today we begin a new Membership @ StBarts class series. Today the Choristers make their fall debut at the 11am service and the Children's Chapel starts next Sunday.

Calendars are filling up fast with fall events. The United Nations General Assembly meets next week, so make a note for gridlock.



With our cultural emphasis on children's care and schooling, this image of Jesus, sitting on the floor, taking a little child into his arms, makes a lovely picture—a rather romantic picture. Did some of you learn this song in your own Sunday School days: "Jesus loves the little children. All the children of the world"? If I were more adventurous, I would sing that for you, but alas, no!

But this wasn't a lovely picture for the disciples. They would have been completely shocked—it's hard-to-impossible for us to realize how much. Here is their famous teacher—a great, important man (which makes them, as his disciples also pretty important). Here Jesus is, taking a child from the house where they're guests and putting her/him into the circle of twelve men. There could hardly have been a bigger contrast. Children in Jesus' time were so low on the status scale that they weren't even on it. They were non-persons, socially invisible, often treated as property if they were noticed at all. Roman authors, even medical writers, rarely mentioned children. Roman citizens who had no children of their own and needed heirs commonly adopted adults rather than children¹. Men particularly did not concern themselves with children; that was women's work.



It's not been an easy week for the disciples. They've been having a private seminar with Jesus—some rare teaching and learning time alone with him after all the crowds. Jesus has, for the second time, told them what will happen to him: "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three

¹ PHEME PERKINS, "The Gospel of Mark," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume VIII, 1995, p. 637.

days after being killed, he will rise again.” Not exactly what they wanted to hear.

But the disciples don’t understand and are afraid to ask Jesus what he means. You know how it is when you’re afraid to ask, hesitant to admit you don’t understand. Do you remember that feeling in school as a child, or in a meeting now at work. Asking would be ... well ... making yourself vulnerable. Others might make fun of you, your might lose face, lose respect.

Jesus must be like the proverbial teacher who has eyes in the back of her head. He asks the disciples, “What were you arguing about?” Again, the disciples are silent, out of fear and/or guilt. They’d been arguing about which of them was the greatest. Jesus had just told them how he would die, and here they are arguing about which of them is the greatest. Who will take the lead when Jesus is gone? And he’s not even gone yet! Imagine Jesus holding his head.

Instead, Jesus sits down, in the traditional posture for teaching. (What would it be like for a preacher today to sit down rather than stand up here ... or up there?) That gets their attention. “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” With that, Jesus brings a child from the household into the circle of men. “Whoever welcomes one such child”—the least of these, the lowest status person, the person of no “use” to you—“welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes ... the one who sent me.”

With this one gesture, Jesus completely overturns, reverses, the conventional perceptions of greatness and honor. And even more so if that child were the child of a household slave. Jesus redefines greatness as servanthood, as humility. I think that’s no more popular today than it was then.



Having an attitude of serving makes all the difference in how we go about our work, doesn’t it? Being proud of your position and fighting the internal battles needed to protect it is one thing, and possibly necessary. But keeping in mind who you’re serving and why—now that brings a whole different dimension, possibly a whole

different orientation, to the work we do.

Humility is not a false modesty. It’s an honest, realistic understanding of yourself, your own strengths and weaknesses. Another way to say that is: Humility is gentleness born of wisdom, which is how the letter of James puts it.

Gentleness born of wisdom. Who is wise and understanding among us? James contrasts gentleness born of wisdom with envy, selfish ambition, boasting. A very similar point to the one Jesus is making.

This letter of James is considered to be general—written not just to one particular church community, but a general letter to many such communities. Interesting that its author asks, “Those conflicts and disputes among you—where do they come from?” Some things don’t change! Conflict is another word for difference. What matters is how we handle our differences. Envy and craving for what someone else has can, at their extreme, lead to murder.

This letter of James is written for an intentional community. Not for a household or a clan, which are bound by blood relationship. Not for a club, which is where we interact with people like ourselves and keep the others out. Not for citizens of a state or county. James writes for an intentional community that doesn’t have to be together, but chooses to be together.

A community like us. We at St. Bart’s are a descendant of that early circle of twelve, and of those earliest Christian intentional communities.

We can be proud that children are “in here” at St. Bart’s. Our chapel next door was built as a chapel for children in 1919. I’ve been here long enough to remember a time, 15-20 years ago when there were very few children here. Now, through very intentional efforts, that chapel is full of children again. Stop in at some Sunday at 10am and see if you can get a seat! We are fortunate and proud to offer wonderfully creative and theologically sound age-appropriate formation programs for children here, and to know that they are loved and cared for.

Even as we realize that not all children are so well cared for. Think of the many who have no parents to guide them, no access to church or

school or adequate health care. And many who don’t have enough to eat or a safe place to sleep.

Servanthood is visible here at St. Bart’s: the Carpenter’s Kids program, in which our parish has committed to funding school for 5 years for 100 orphaned children in Tanzania; Love’s Harvest, which is helping a village in Africa become self-sufficient; Habitat for Humanity, in which St. Bart’s folks help build houses for those who have none. And every day, every week, year in and year out, we feed and shelter our brothers and sisters who are homeless.

St. Bart’s is also known for our “radical welcome.” That sign on our front steps says it all: “Let every guest who enters be welcomed as Christ.”

Conflicts and disputes? Yes, they are part of the history, which we own. We still have them, and probably will continue to. But may we continue to grow in gentleness and wisdom in how we handle them.

I heard a story about a prominent church that wanted to be more welcoming and to grow. Having a number of corporate and marketing executives in the congregation, the church undertook a sophisticated study and planning effort to figure out how to attract more “customers.” A monk watching and listening to them asked, “Who is your customer?” The committee began to argue among themselves. Finally, the monk said quietly, “I think your customer is Jesus.”

“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes ... the one who sent me.”

May we welcome each person here, with gentleness and wisdom.

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For information about St. Bartholomew’s and its life of faith and mission at an important American crossroads write to the parish office, 325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022, or call 212/378-0222. You can also visit us on the web at www.stbarts.org.