

July 1, 2012

The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 5:21-43

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

The Rev'd Geoffrey M. St.J. Hoare, rector

Accomplishment Over Acolades

The humble pun, the lowest form of wit according to some, has had a checkered past, faithfully recounted by a prize winning punster called John Pollack. In one of its better periods the pun flourished with the theater and public houses in the time of Charles I. The puritans came along. The pun went out of fashion and the first coffee houses began to appear. With the restoration of the monarchy under Charles II, these coffeehouses became another incubator for rich and changing language often including the pun. Nonetheless punning was still something that could be dangerous if the joke was at the expense of someone powerful. And no one was more powerful, even with a slightly limited constitutional monarchy, than the King. Charles II had a jester who, also a playwright was called Charles Killigrew, and who had a reputation for being able to make a pun on any subject. Hearing this, the king issued Killigrew a command and challenge that he “make a pun on me.” Killigrew responded immediately that such would be impossible “for the King is no subject.”¹

American Independence was in part driven by a desire to be freed from such subjectivity, of course, and that independence is worth celebrating. However in this land of equal opportunity and freedom from oppression, we seem to have found that much of our need to distinguish ourselves from one another crossed the oceans with the shipboard rats and we find ourselves in a land riddled with distinctions of class and status. You might have heard of David McCullough Jr. He achieved minor celebrity status last month with an address to the graduating class of Wellesley High School in Massachusetts. He told the students that they were not special. He said that “astrophysicists assure us (that) the Universe has no center, so you can't be it.”² He was concerned that we are all caught up in a kind of “Darwinian competition with one another.” He said: “of late, we Americans, to our detriment, come to love accolades more than genuine achievement.” He took on the game of resume building suggesting that if a student took spring break to build a clinic in Guatemala solely for the purpose of building his or her college application, then that student had cheapened a worthy endeavor. He told them that their soccer trophies really didn't mean very much because everybody gets a trophy these days. Apparently this speech was very well received.

Mr. McCullough reflected on the impact he had had in an article he published in *Newsweek*³. He had wanted to offer some humor, some thoughts to ponder and an exhortation for the students to make for themselves and for the rest of us,

¹ John Pollack, *The Pun Also Rises* (Gotham Books 2011) p.71

² http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_lfxYhtf8o4

³ David McCullough Jr. *You're Not Special* Newsweek June 25, 2012, p.26-27

“extraordinary lives, abundant in energy and guided by a spirit of selflessness.” The reaction was fast and furious. Radio, television and newspapers around the world showed interest fuelled by bloggers, tweeters and the like. One set of reactions, he said, was from religious people who wanted him to know that all of God’s children are special. Surely both these things are true. None of us is special over against other people; and we can see all around us people for whom accolades are more important than accomplishment. God spare us from people who seek high office who want the position but do not enjoy the challenge of the work be they Presidents, CEOs, Bishops or ball players. Surely, at the same time, however we are all special in God’s sight, of infinite worth because we are made by Love for Love. Noelle—(for those of you visiting, Noelle York-Simmons is our wonderful Associate Rector and is currently on a well earned holiday)—Noelle spoke at the Baccalaureate Service for the Westminster Schools this year. She also told the class of 2012 that they are not as special as they might think they are, or as Apple or Coca Cola or anyone else purveying a product thinks they are, or even as special as their parents think they are. They, she said, are as special as God thinks they are.⁴

This is a gospel message—Good News—embedded in our story from Mark today. A leader of the synagogue, no less—a man of stature and status in his community fears for the life of his daughter. *“My daughter is at the point of death...”* Jesus is on his way to Jairus’ daughter when a woman pushes her way through a crowd and grabbed his cloak in a desperate attempt to get relief from her condition. She had been bleeding for years and so was considered unclean, and outcast, a person of no status whatsoever. And what does Jesus call her? He calls her ‘daughter’. *“Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace and be healed of your disease.”* It is during what for Jairus can only have seemed an unnecessary delay that *his* daughter died. What makes any of us special? Jesus went on to heal Jairus’ daughter also. *Daughter.* Daughter in the eyes of God. Worthy by grace. Worthy by love. Grace and Love, available to all, regardless of position in the world’s terms. So easy to recognize. So difficult for us to really and truly grasp.

As we prepare to celebrate the founding of this nation, it is well to take a moment to think about how God’s grace can also shape our common life. This is one of those days in the year when we process the American flag, offering even our national life on the altar seeking God’s continuing and transformative grace. You’ve heard of the doctrine of American Exceptionalism, the idea that America has a special role in the world to spread democratic ideals of freedom, an idea criticized by post-nationalist scholars, but one that continues to have a real hold on our political imaginations and so our international policy. On one hand we are no more special than everyone else. We are not granted some inalienable rights by virtue of our status or wealth or power. But we are special when we can see such things as gifts to be used in the service of others, the building of genuine community among nations, power exercised in humility founded on hope rather than fear. It is the same for us as for this country. Our status as beloved children of God is the foundation for our accomplishing extraordinary things for the common

good. Accolades are not the point. Offering ourselves in love after the model and pattern of Jesus is the point. When we live in the freedom of God's grace, independent of striving for status and independent of fear, then we have much to celebrate and can accomplish great things for the common good.

In a brief silence of prayer I invite you to give thanks for the freedoms that we enjoy in this country, notably the freedom to worship without fear. *Daughter, your faith has made you well...* Let us pray...