



St. Aidan's and St. Bartholomew's in Gibsons: November 5, 2017

Matthew 23:1-12

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

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For the longest time I used to hear these words in a particular way—that all of us who are at the top of the ladder and are somehow consciously or unconsciously lording it over others are riding for a fall and that all of us who are at the bottom of the ladder are in some way, at some time, in some place going to be moving up.

And so, of course, this interpretation has been a mixed bag for me (and perhaps would be for you). For at some points in my life (on account of being a woman, on account of going through a time when I had very little money, on account of being unemployed) I considered myself to be at the bottom of the ladder. And other times, on account of being white, on account of being well educated, on account of being employed, on account of the positions I have held—especially this one—I have considered myself to be at the top of that ladder.

And so, all of this is very puzzling. Which direction are you and I headed in—up or down? Does being at the bottom of the ladder at one time count for anything or is it all about where we find ourselves now and the kind of unconscious way we move in a world in which we, most of us, have privilege and power?

And so, what does Jesus really mean? Was he talking about descending and ascending some kind of ladder of social and economic position, or was he trying to get at something else? I believe he was trying to get at something else—and that something else is expressed in Gregory Boyle's book entitled *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*.

The book is about Boyle's work in the Los Angeles area with mostly Latino and Latina gang members who became involved with gangs because it offered them status in a world in which they had little or no status. In the middle of story after story about individuals that Boyle met we hear about something called Homeboy Industries, an organization that Boyle founded that offers former gang members jobs and a way to remove the gang tattoos all over their bodies, all as a way to move from death to life.

And this, of course, is all very wonderful. It is wonderful to read. For instance, to read about a young man named Bandit who got his life back through working in the warehouse at Homeboy Industries. It was wonderful to read about Chico who reclaimed his life, at least for a while by working at a local non-profit. He was working with computers because that's what he always wanted to do before he joined a gang. It was wonderful to read about Manny who was accepted to college after working at Homeboy Industries. And, finally, wonderful to read about Omar who after hearing that Father Boyle had officiated at the funerals of 75 gang members, decided to get out of the life.

But in the end, the book is more than just story after story about people from humble backgrounds who with the help of Homeboy Industries and Father Boyle are able to steer their lives from death to life. The book is about what happens to Boyle, himself—a person of privilege and power who found himself intimately involved with former gang members. What he discovered was that “doing a good thing for others” from a sense of largesse was not enough. Rather, the gift being offered to him was the gift of kinship with those who were not his kin, a kinship that makes sitting apart at the best seat or sitting above those somehow judged to be lesser unthinkable. Unthinkable. For if he or we were to do this we would miss the joy of life together with our kin.

What I believe that Jesus is really getting at in this passage, this passage that criticizes those who by their respected positions sit apart from and above others, this passage that criticizes those of us whose acts of compassion and mercy don't measure up to our words, this passage that says that you and I are not above others because God is the one above us all, this passage that says that the exalted will be humbled and the humbled exalted, what I believe this passage is really getting at is this: in Christ, all ladders have been taken away, any gap between God and humanity has been bridged and all of us have been made one another's family members.

Let me quote Boyle on this:

Mother Teresa is said to have diagnosed the world's ills in this way: “We've just forgotten that we belong to each other.” Kinship is what happens when we refuse to let this happen. With kinship as the goal, other essential things fall into place; without it, no justice, no peace. I suspect that were kinship the goal, we would no longer be promoting justice, we would be celebrating it.”

Often we strike the high moral distance that separates “us” from “them” and yet it is God’s dream come true when we recognize that there exists no daylight between us. Serving others is good. It’s a start. But it’s just the hallway that leads to the Grand Ballroom.

Kinship—not serving the other, but being one with the other. Jesus was not “a man for others;” he was one of them. There is a world of difference in that.

And so those former gang members in LA are cousins of ours. That Muslim refugee you met the other day is your long-lost sister. That homeless man in Vancouver you ran into on the street corner is your brother. That elderly woman at the check-out line at the drug store who was moving so slowly is your grandmother. That Indigenous child at the grocery store is your grandchild. And those people who come to the foodbank here are your family members.

And this is a gift to us, a blessing to us, in that we are enriched by our relationship with them, we are made more human by the shared moments, the shared food and the shared conversation with those who are our kin.

St. Bartholomew’s has been celebrating its 125th Anniversary this entire year. Think of it—125 years of offering worship, formation and connection to your own members and to those in this community. An important part of this in recent years, of course, has been the food bank, a valuable and essential gift to this parish’s more vulnerable neighbours. The last time I was here for a parish visit, one or two of your members took Eric and I on a tour through the space set aside for the foodbank and with great pride described all those groups who routinely donate food, the careful process by which the foodbank operates and the importance of this unique offering in the community. I was impressed. And what our Gospel for today tells us is that this good work is meant for joy—the joy of those who come to the foodbank and find nothing less than their kin in this place, and the joy of you who serve in the foodbank discovering kinfolk among those whom they serve. For in Christ, any above or below, any exaltation or humiliation has been done away with, for in Christ there is no daylight between us.