

Sixth Sunday of Easter (Year B) – May 10, 2015
Acts 10:44-48; Psalm 98; I John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

“I do not call you servants any longer...but I have called you friends”

“As Christ breaks bread and bids us share, each proud division ends. That love that made us makes us one, and strangers now are friends.” - Hymn 304, The Hymnal 1982, v. 3

Most of you know the old saying, “God couldn’t be everywhere, so he created Mothers.” Out of respect and reverence for our mothers on this Mother’s Day I certainly wouldn’t dispute that! But of course we grow up and leave home and encounter a different adage that goes something like: “Your mother doesn’t work here—or, your mother doesn’t live here—so, clean up your own mess.” Yes, though we do live in a society that is geared, it seems, to serving and to service, and to public and private services that are designed to help us clean up our messes. So, how’s that going? To help us assess that, let’s look also at today’s gospel reading. To help us assess that, let’s also look at today’s gospel reading.

This gospel passage reminds me that throughout history, various prophets and leaders have asserted values that opposed the order of their day—they appeared to their societies to have everything backwards, as measured against their contemporaries’ popular standards and the status quo. They are people like the ancient prophets Jeremiah and Amos—or a more modern example, Martin Luther King, Jr.—who also had it “backwards” in this traditional prophetic sense, as he led a non-violent revolution to challenge and change the order of things. He continued to get it “backwards” as it were, even *after* his revolution as he pressed on and was misunderstood even by his own followers and former allies. Dr. King first led the Civil Rights Movement which secured basic political and civil rights for African American and other minority groups. Yet he pressed on to question the U.S. role in Vietnam and to organize a multi-racial poor people’s campaign for economic rights and opportunities. After his significant accomplishments, by his ongoing and persistent inclusion of all people, Dr. King still had it “backwards” in the eyes of many who had supported him earlier.

In a similar vein, Jesus was one who had it “backwards.” He said that the poor will inherit the Kingdom. He said it was the hungry who would be satisfied. He said those who weep will be those who laugh. While Jesus had it backwards in the prophetic sense, would He, like Dr. King, still appear to have it backwards in the eyes of the faithful through the centuries after the Christian revolution, as it were? The traditional summation of Christ’s reversal of the given order has been defined by Christians as his mandate to be a servant, not a lord. The highest vision of Christian discipleship is to reverse the order, to fulfill a mission of service rather than somehow lording it over others. We serve Christ by taking to heart his example of washing the feet of his disciples.¹

Yes, servanthood and service as the paradigm—though, as Professor John McKnight points out in his book The Careless Society, in our day, there is a problem with our dedication to service as the ultimate Christian ideal, without some sort of corrective or

qualifier or whole new paradigm.ⁱⁱ After all, the Crusaders, and later the conquistadors, the Inquisitors and witch hunters, thought they were servants of Christ. We would doubt that today. The missionaries along with the colonizers who went to Africa, Asia and the Americas thought they were servants of Christ. But many question that today.

So, it is clear that many people in history who saw themselves as Christian servants did not reverse the order; they didn't really have it "backwards." Instead, they used the notion of servanthood to conquer, rule and dominate others in Christ's name.ⁱⁱⁱ A good servant must really have it "backwards." He or she cannot use the Christian ideals and imperatives of mission and service and discipleship to dominate and control. Today it may seem easier to distinguish the good servants from the bad. Because of the abuses by "public servants" in the days of Jim Crow and McCarthyism, Vietnam and Watergate, Iran-Contra and many more recent examples, we know that modern-day Crusaders, conquistadors and missionaries can be bad servants.

For the most part, our good servants these days seem clearly to help, care and cure rather than conquer, exploit and control. Our good servants include doctors and nurses, teachers and social workers, ministers and lawyers, psychologists and counselors, fire and police personnel, soldiers, many public officials and a number of other professionals who serve. Our society has even made these good servants, the helping professionals, the economic base of our nation. In GNP terms, more than two-thirds of our employed people now produce or deliver services. We have become an economy of servants. We are a nation of servers. As Christians, we could celebrate the institutionalization of the good servant. Ours is finally a society of caring, helping, curing servanthood. We laud the value of professional servanthood, and pay for it generously.

Yet, in our society of servants, it is interesting to consider what Christ might see, with his tendency toward getting things "backwards." Would he even reject a society of good servants? The answer is probably not, unless he saw good servants becoming lords. Probably not, unless he saw help becoming control, care becoming commercialized, and cure becoming immobilizing. If he found these things Jesus would probably insist that we hadn't understood him, that our servanthood had become lordship.^{iv}

At his last supper, Jesus was telling his disciples those things of greatest importance to him. It was his final opportunity to communicate the core values of his faith. In John's gospel report of these concluding instructions, Jesus said, "I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father" (John 15:15). Here, finally Jesus says, I do *not* call you servants. For *you know* what servants don't know. I call you *friends*. Perhaps beyond the revolution of Christian service—or human service—is the final revolution, namely, the possibility of being friends. Friends are people who know each other; who care, love, respect, struggle, forgive, do justice, and have a commitment to each other through time, as beautifully illustrated in the relationship between Jesus and his friends in our gospel. Friends are people who understand that it is not servants—whether "public servants" or professional servants—who ultimately make God's world. Rather, friends are people who understand that it is

through their mutual action in local community that the common good is really served. Christ's mandate to be friends is a revolutionary idea in our serving society. Here we are, a nation of professionalized servers, public servants in governmental or human services, or in service industries, following this mandate to serve. Yet, here Jesus is, at the final moment, appearing to get it backwards once again. The final message is not "serve." Rather, he directs us, "be friends."

Why friends rather than servants? Perhaps it is because Jesus knew that servants and the systems of service in which they are a part could always become lords, but that friends—real friends—could not. In our time, professionalized servants who are often caring people—and the institutions from which they serve—nonetheless, can become limited by the *unknowing friendlessness*—and downright unfriendliness—of their help. Just stand in line at most large government or human or financial services agencies—or using your phone, wait on hold forever with a large service company (like your phone or cable company or mortgage provider)—to get that feeling first hand. And these are just some of the more trivial examples. Their focus on the management of the service rather than on the person being served often results in behavior that can only be described as callous and downright unfriendly. Friends, on the other hand, are people liberated by the possibilities of knowing how to help each other. Servants are people who know the "mysteries," as it were, that can control those to whom they are supposedly giving "help," be they clients, customers, constituents—whomever. But friends are people who know each other. They are free to give and receive help; lead and be led; befriend and through that, truly serve.

Friendship, the final revolution—but wait!—for there he goes again!—for finally, having taken the paradigm of relationship and responsibility from servanthood to friendship—as if that wasn't enough, the Risen Jesus takes it a final revolutionary step further to declare that we are brothers and sisters with Jesus and one another—such that we are no longer just our brother's keeper, as it were—or servant, or even friend—but rather, we are our brother's brother or sister, and all one family in God.^v Wow!—what would this world be like if we really believed and acted on that?

ⁱ As followers of Christ, we are people who have it "backwards," as well, supposedly, as we act as servants rather than lords. As Jesus stated, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:42-45).

ⁱⁱ John McKnight *The Careless Society: Community and Its Counterfeits* (Basic Books/HarperCollins Publishers, 1995), pp. 175-179. I am indebted to Prof. McKnight for some of the ideas in this sermon.

ⁱⁱⁱ They had Christ backwards. It is not enough, therefore, to ask whether someone says he or she is serving Christ and others. There are bad servants and there are good servants. The critical issue is to understand the difference.

^{iv} The question then, is whether we are a nation of good servants or the lord (or victims) of commercialized, immobilizing (or exploitative) *systems of service* that actually control others. I wonder whether our human nature most often *tends* to make servanthood into lordship. It may be that there is no way to define service

so that we will not get it backwards and make it a system of control over others. With all our Christian devotion to the ideal of service—of servanthood—could service be an inadequate ideal, a value so easily corrupted that we should question its usefulness?

^v Matthew 28:10; John 20:17 (confirming his earlier statements in Mark 3:34-35; and in his “high priestly” prayer in John (Ch. 17)).