

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 20, 2009
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Buffalo, New York
The Rev. Eric Olaf Olsen

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

About six years ago I was officiating at a Wedding outside of the church in a rather noisy outdoor banquet facility. During the middle of the sermon, I knew that the bride and the groom were being distracted by extraneous noises and I remember asking God to help me help them to hear the good news in the midst of the racket. I asked the bride and groom to close their eyes and to keep them shut as I motioned to the congregation to stand. I reminded the couple that God brought them together and gave them gifts to share with each other and that all those assembled before them loved them and would walk with them in times of joy and trial. I told them that in my hospice training I learned that our auditory sense was extremely powerful and that it was the last to leave us when we die. I commented that there would be tough times in their life together where they may feel like they are dying or that their relationship was dying. I said when you feel that way, I want you to grasp each other's hands and close your eyes and listen to the loud cheers of your family and friends and remember this moment. Then I said, "People let's give it up for this great couple!" The place erupted with thunderous applause and all other sounds were silenced. It has since become a signature in nearly all of the weddings I have presided over since and each time, tears flow down my cheeks. It is transformative to hear how much love there is for you.

So what if I motioned to the congregation to rise and said, "Let's give it up for our God?" Certainly God would hear us, but doesn't God always hear us? Would even our loudest cheers feel like an embarrassingly small public display of appreciation for God? Shouldn't we give up a little more for The One and Only Almighty and Merciful God? If so, what should that be?

It is hard to give up status and privilege. It is hard to step down to serve.

There is an old joke that goes like this:

A bishop walks into the large gothic cathedral and falls down on his knees before the altar and says, "Forgive me God for I am a worthless sinner." Soon thereafter a priest does the same, falling to his knees before the altar and says, "God forgive me, for I am a worthless sinner." A few moments later an unkempt and disheveled man with a foul odor and bloody knuckles walked up to the altar and fell to his knees and said, "Forgive me God for I am a worthless sinner." Outraged, the priest leans over toward the bishop and says, "Who the heck does this guy think he is!"

The humor is rather dry and stinging I admit. The truth revealed however is that even the church can be a place where service becomes a show and sacrifice is ritualized. Worse yet it can become a place where people seek to glorify themselves through defaming others.

Animal Planet's block buster hit series, **Jockeys**, reveals the real life cut throat competition that exists between equestrian pilots. Some of the jockeys will do just about anything to ride in the Kentucky Derby, the holy grail of horse racing, even if it means undercutting and denigrating a colleague. One thing that today's lectionary readings stress is that we need not jockey for positions in God's kingdom.

Jeremiah, the Old Testament prophet that we heard from today certainly wasn't winning any popularity contests from the people he was engaging. If you recall, Jeremiah was conscripted and commissioned by God to bring a message of God's judgment upon the people of Judah, Jerusalem and the nations. This is because they had turned their back on God and literally, gave God up. The people's behavior became selfish and self serving and detestable. They allowed their wants to be their gods.

In Jeremiah 6: 13-15 we read,

“For from the least to the greatest of them,
everyone is greedy for unjust gain;
and from prophet to priest,
everyone deals falsely.

14 They have treated the wound of my people carelessly,
saying, "Peace, peace,"
when there is no peace.

15 They acted shamefully, they committed abomination;
yet they were not ashamed,
they did not know how to blush.

Therefore they shall fall among those who fall;
at the time that I punish them, they shall be overthrown,
says the LORD.”

As a result of his faithfulness to God and for serving as a true prophet, Jeremiah is attacked by his own brothers, beaten and put into the stocks by a priest and a false prophet, jailed by the king, threatened with death, thrown into a well, and is discredited and ridiculed by another false prophet. It gets so bad that Jeremiah in his honest lament to God, fears that his own life will shortly be taken from him. Yet he continues to serve faithfully and he does not plan to fight back violently. He will not play by the destructive rules which rob life and hope and he will not give up. Instead he appeals to God for justice and struggles honestly in prayer while continuing his mission. While none of us might willingly switch positions with Jeremiah, we must confess that he is an amazing role model for us.

But like that old saying, when the going get's tough, the tough go to Florida, we need more than role models of people with steadfastness of faith in times of persecution to inspire us to a life of service. We need some music to dance to.

When Leonard Bernstein was once asked what the most difficult instrument was he answered, “2nd fiddle. Plenty of people want to play 1st violin but to get someone to play second violin or second flute, etc...That's a problem. Yet, without them there is no harmony.”

Both today's epistle lesson from James and the Gospel urge the disciples of Jesus to give up discord and the desire for hierarchical stratification among each other. Earlier in the book of James we discovered that there was a definite tension between wealthy and poor believers. In the gospel we discover that the disciples were arguing about who was the greatest disciple and before that the disciples were arguing with another person that was casting out demons in Jesus' name, but who was not a member in the prestigious "Club of Twelve". Even though Jesus just finished giving his second of three predictions of his death and resurrection, their ears are still full of wax. Jesus tells them they must be deacons if they want to be great, they have to care for the poor, neglected, vulnerable and the sick. Being great is about submission to God's mission. Being great means being part of a work that is bigger than you. It is about being part of God's work, but can our egos handle being a servant fulltime? Can we serve joyfully and make a difference in God's world? To challenge the disciples Jesus takes a child that was already in their midst and probably overlooked as unimportant or as a nuisance and places the child in front of them. He tells them if they honor the child, they honor him and if they honor him they honor God.

Certified Speaking Professional, Barbara Glanz has been recruited as a motivational speaker for thousands of corporations and organizations. On one such occasion she was addressing the employees of a large Supermarket. She told them if the Supermarket was to thrive, they would all have to use their unique gifts in serving their customers. In some way they would have to give from their heart and leave their signature on the hearts of their patrons. The presentation went well and then a few weeks later Barbara got a letter from a young man named Johnny who has Down syndrome and who worked as a bagger on the check out line. He said that he listened to the presentation and thought very hard about how he could give from his heart and then he had an idea. Every day after work he would look for a thought of the day or write one if he could not find one and he would ask his father to help him print it out on his computer. Then he would cut them in strips and give them to the customers he bagged for. Barbara was moved by Johnny's enthusiasm to give from his heart to make someone else's day brighter. About three weeks later the general manager of the store called Barbara to say that last week while walking through the store he approached the front end and saw a register completely backed up with a long line that ended all the way back near the frozen food cases. Immediately he called more check out personnel to the front to try and open additional registers thinking that only one was open. Then he tried to redirect people at the end of the line to other open lanes, but no one would budge. You see everyone in line wanted to receive one of Johnny's thoughts of the day!

Just like Jeremiah, who God said he knew before he was formed and whom he consecrated for service before he was born, God also knows us and has consecrated us for service. Jeremiah's name literally means *Yahweh exalts* and when we serve God as we were intended to do, when we live into the power of our baptism, God lifts us and uses us to lift others. Just like the disciples who have a problem hearing the good news when it doesn't fit neatly into their plans, we too struggle to hear God's call for us, but the good news is that God does not give up. Our God gave it all up so that we could understand our mission and have the power to fulfill it.

One night at his dinner table in June of 1540, Luther said, "Christ fights with the devil in a curious way - the devil with great numbers, cleverness and steadfastness - Christ with few people

with weakness, simplicity and contempt and yet Christ wins. So he wished us to be sheep and our adversaries wolves... It is a remarkable war and a strange fight in which the sheep are killed and the wolves stay alive – But they will all go to ruin as a result, because God alone performs miracles. He'll preserve his sheep in the midst of the wolves and he'll crush the jaws of the wolves forever.”

We are called to be faithful, not to necessarily win the battles against violence, greed, hatred, envy and injustice, but to fight them. We do not fight fire with fire, but we use kindness, mercy, forgiveness, and love. When we engage in service we become God's good thoughts for the day.

Ultimately, however, it is God's work that makes our actions possible. We are beloved in God's eyes and all are precious not because of what we give up for God, but because of what God has given up for us. It is God who gave up Jesus, his only son, who gave up his own life on the cross to show us the divine heart. In raising Jesus, God declares that the ultimate victory is secured and gives us the sacred heart of Christ as our heart.

So the question remains.... Can we *give it up* for our Almighty Merciful God?