



ALL SAINTS CHURCH
PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

The Greatest

A sermon preached by the Rev. Zelda Kennedy
October 18, 2009

What I am not, make me.

What I know not, teach me.

What I have not, give me in the most precious Name of God: Creator, Redeemer and Giver of life, who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

Brett Blair wrote that “During the American Revolution a man in civilian clothes rode past a group of soldiers repairing a small defensive barrier. Their leader was shouting instructions, but making no attempt to help. When asked, “Why,” by the rider, he retorted with great dignity, "Sir, I am a corporal!" The stranger apologized, dismounted, and proceeded to help the exhausted soldiers. When the job was done, he turned to the corporal and said, "Corporal, next time you have a job like this and not enough men to do it, go to your commander-in-chief, and I will come and help you again." With that George Washington got back on his horse and rode off.¹

I recall this story because it reminds me of James and John in today’s gospel, when they ask Jesus if they can sit on the right and left hands of Jesus when he comes into his glory. They impress me as thinking they are the greatest of the disciples and therefore deserving of the honor. These two disciples, who were very close to Jesus, understood the importance of power.

While this request is surprising to Jesus and the other disciples, what is more amazing is Jesus’ response to the sons of Zebedee. He doesn’t get upset over their ambition. Jesus knows there is nothing wrong with desiring to have power.

The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. states it best when he once wrote, “*There is nothing wrong with power if power is used correctly. . . . And one of the great problems of history is that the concepts of love and power have been contrasted as opposites – polar opposites – so that love is identified with the resignation of power and power with the denial of love. Now power properly understood is nothing but the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political and economic change. What is needed is the realization that power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is*

¹ The Three Poison Pills of Position, Prestige, and Power by Brett C. Blair; Collected Sermons, Brett C. Blair, ChristianGlobe Network, 2003

sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love”²

Therefore, Jesus, after asking James and John a series of questions, realizes he has a teaching opportunity with all the disciples and states:

“You know how among the Gentiles those who exercise authority are domineering and arrogant, those ‘great ones’ are tyrants over them. It cannot be like that with you. Instead, whoever aspires to greatness must serve the rest, and whoever wants to be first must serve the needs of all. For even the Promised One did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for all.” Mark 10:42-45, Inclusive Bible

“Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first, must be slave of all.” Mark 10:43b-44, English Standard Version

This lesson of power and love that Jesus teaches the disciples is still relevant for us today. There is a delicate balance between the two. *“What is needed is the realization that power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love”³*

“Today is Children’s Sabbath, a special weekend to celebrate how wonderful children are. It is also a time to learn about the problems and hard times many children and families are having. A time to look at how, with God’s help, we can all work hard to change things for children so that every child has the hope that not only today, but also tomorrow is better for all of us.”⁴

I hope that all of you have taken the time to read the *Children’s Prayer* found in the front of our liturgy. It is a prayer of contrasts. It is a prayer that reminds us that those who hold the greatest place in God’s kingdom are often considered least. Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth; anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” Mark 10: 14b-15. NIV

In preparation for today’s sermon, I read as much material as possible from the Children’s Defense Fund manual regarding the National Observance of Children’s Sabbaths. I learned that this is the 18th year of celebrating. Marian Wright Edelman wrote to all churches participating in this weekend, “You are bringing to life and putting into action a core conviction of each of our religious traditions that children are sacred gifts from God, and that we as adults bear responsibility for nurturing and protecting children – especially those who are poor, excluded, and most vulnerable.”

² Where Do We Go From Here? Dr. MLK, Jr. last Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) presidential address before his death

³ Ibid.

⁴ Taken from National Observance of Children’s Sabbaths Manual, p. 99

As I read the statement, I recalled my own journey as a child growing up in the Episcopal Church. Remembering how the adults, through their love and tenacity protected us from the ugliness of racism; fed us before sending us home because they knew for some the meal provided may have been our only nutritious meal for the week; and instilled in us, that even if we were poor, we were blessed with an abundance of gifts that must be used and not taken for granted.

I once read story about a rabbi and a soap maker who went for a walk together one day. As they walked along, the soap maker said to the Rabbi, "What good is religion? Look at all the trouble and misery of the world after thousands of years of teaching about goodness, love, truth and peace - and this after all the prayers, sermons, and teachings. If religion is good and true, why should this be?"

The Rabbi thought about the question. It is the question so many of us ask when we encounter suffering. What good is God - what good is religion, if all this misery and suffering still exist? However, the rabbi said nothing. They continued walking until he noticed a child playing in the gutter. Then the rabbi said: "Look at that child. You say that soap makes people clean, but see the dirt on that youngster. Of what good is soap? With all the soap in the world, the child is still filthy. I wonder how effective soap is after all." The soap maker protested, "But, Rabbi, soap can't do any good unless it is used." "Exactly", replied the Rabbi. "And so it is with religion and God's love for us. They are ineffective unless they are applied."

We, the people of All Saints Church, have the opportunity to use our resources to become the greatest while putting our "grace into action". We have the opportunity to use our power and love to change the human race into the greatest human family. In a recent article of *Saints Alive*, Ed Bacon, rector of All Saints wrote, "*It is increasingly clear with each monthly trip to Chicago that while I am a messenger that I would not have the message I express on the radio broadcasts were it not for the experience of my being a member of the All Saints faith community. The message is that in every experience grace is trying to trump, that in every moment something sacred is at stake, that no one is outside the purview of divine love, and that healthy religion and spirituality are always based in compassion. There is no experience where God's Spirit isn't requesting recognition. God not only dwells in everyone, God enters every experience.*"⁵

Last Sunday, my brother Abel Lopez preached at the 1pm service and told the following:

He shared that his father had a method of engendering trust in his children that involved placing them in the top of a tree. Then, Abel's father would encourage his children to jump into his arms. When it became Abel's turn, he was placed into a tree where his father encouraged him to jump. Abel said, "My father stood below the tree and said, 'Son, jump, jump,' while I thought, 'crazy, crazy!'" Abel shared, that he asked himself why should I jump from this tree, where I am safe and protected? However, his father said, "Son, I want you to trust me. My arms are wide enough. I am strong enough. Jump into my arms." Abel said he looked at his father and thought, maybe, as his father stood with arms still extended. Finally, Abel jumped into his

⁵ Saints Alive; October 25, 2009

father's waiting arms. The experience was so delightful, he asked his father to replace him into the tree so that he might jump again. Following the story, Abel told the congregation, "My father represents God for this community – the God of love that wants us to jump into God's arms." I agree. God wants us to step out in faith, while saying, "My arms are wide enough. I am strong enough. Jump into my waiting arms. I will protect you. Trust me."

It is now our turn. It is now our turn to remember the God with extended arms as we remember and acknowledge all our children, with our arms open wide. I believe we can do something about the domination of poverty that is crushing the lives of 13.5 million children in our nation alone. We can do something about the lack of health care coverage that prevents nine million children in our nation from seeing a doctor when needed, thus resulting in unnecessary illnesses and deaths.

And for anyone who is having difficulty imagining this, let me put a face on a child who grew up with inadequate health care. There were times when my parents could not send us to the doctor because we were not sufficiently covered. My parents used home remedies and prayed that our illnesses did not escalate into something more serious. And, we didn't even think about going to a dentist - receiving dental care was a luxury.

It is because of the caring adults in my community, I believe I am here today. It is because they extended their love to me with open arms that I am here today. We, too, can impact and change the lives of children.

Linda Creed and Michael Messer wrote the following words to a song sung by George Benson and Whitney Houston:

I believe the children are our future, Teach them well and let them lead the way; Show them all the beauty they possess inside; Give them a sense of pride to make it easier; Let the children's laughter remind us how we used to be. . . .

I say let the children's laughter (or noise) remind us how we can become! We can become the greatest, through balancing power with love and compassion. It is our turn, so let's do it!

Amen