



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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Ain't Nobody Better than Nobody Else

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, May 10, 2015
The Sixth Sunday of Easter: Based on Acts 10:44-81 and John 15:9-17*

I admit that this is dangerous way to begin a sermon, and it almost guarantees that I shall make an egregious mistake today. But here goes anyway: I am an arrogant grammarian, which is not consistent with my general way of being. I am not obnoxiously confident about many things; in fact, I am pretty retiring and uncertain in most ways. But I admit to knowing a great deal about grammar. I never miss on a "who" or "whom" and cherish the correct use of predicate nominatives. It doesn't matter to me at all that the misuse of these arcane rules has become largely normative in our culture; in fact, knowing that I am right when most others are so thoroughly wrong is actually what I most love about the whole deal. And sadly but truthfully I am rarely repentant about this flaw. Perhaps it is time that you learn this about me.

This week, however, something caused me to question my absoluteness about correct grammar. I encountered a posting on Facebook by the Bishop of Alabama, Kee Sloan, a wonderful guy and a former colleague from Mississippi. Bishop Sloan, in an address to a large gathering as part of the National Prayer Breakfast, used an unfortunate colloquialism to tell this faithful and august group of people a truth by which he hopes to live. He said, "Ain't nobody better than nobody else." Naturally, I cringed at its mortal assault on proper speech and was particularly chagrined that it had occurred at the hands of a Southerner, a bishop no less—another dark moment for the land of my birth. But, then, reluctantly coming down from my high horse, I thought about what he said, really considering the message despite the manner in which it was delivered, and realized how true his simple claim is and how a wider understanding and acceptance of it in the church and in the world could critically affect our lives for the good.

From the Acts of the Apostles the author writes, "While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles." **Even** on the Gentiles. It has never been easy for us in any of our iterations as faithful people to truly believe that "Ain't nobody better than nobody else"—because deep inside we believe we are, that our faith really is better. These pious, excited new Christians of the first century, all ethnic Jews, found it hard to imagine that the spirit of God was big enough to fall even on the Gentiles. Throughout history their identity and their survival had depended upon their belief that as God's chosen people they were indeed better than others. Jesus' extraordinary and revolutionary message that God's love was broader than what they had been taught to believe was hard to conceive, let alone accept.

And it still is. In a variety of ways through the years, we as Christians have had great difficulty in imagining that others—just as they are—are as cherished by God as we are. And this has been true not only of our attitudes about those of other faiths but of Christians who practice their faith differently from the way we practice ours. I don't have any answers; honestly I love the way we do it and would hate to imagine changing substantially. And, yet, I am pretty sure that it has to change. Whether it does or doesn't though, about this I am absolutely positive: any residual of the notion that the way we do it—believe, worship—is the *only* or *best* way has to end. The rapid and dramatic arrival of globalism as our new normal demands that we come to understand this truth about ourselves and others with our hearts as well as our heads. Beyond the obvious advantage of being simply able to coexist, it occurs to me that being forced to live up close (everything is up close now and no amount of gated this or gated that can change that fact) brings wonderful new possibilities for attempting to not only understand but more importantly to emulate what Jesus really meant about love. Admitting that in the ultimate sense nobody is better than anyone else is a good place to start.

In the gospel lesson this morning we are told that Jesus said again and again to his disciples: "This is my

commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” Before any of us can even begin to give or receive love like that, we must lose the notion that love is somehow related to merit, to worthiness. Such love, which is what I believe Bishop Sloan was talking about, is not based on meritocracy. His poorly worded claim, “Ain’t nobody better than nobody else,” does not negate the fact that many people outperform others, scholastically, athletically, monetarily, even grammatically. It simply means that **doing** better, performing better, succeeding more does not mean that someone **is** better or more lovable than any other human being. To that sentence we could add and have often added the words, “in the eyes of God.” We could say that **doing** better doesn’t mean that someone **is** better *in the eyes of God*. But to do so lets us off the hook, suggesting that while God loves that, we don’t or can’t. This cannot be true; we, as children of God, as heirs of God, are called to love that way ourselves. And here we fall dramatically short. We are so programmed to be impressed with achievements (which indeed **are** impressive) that we forget that such achievements simply mean that while the achiever is clearly better at achieving (sometimes affected by individual talent and almost always by the place from which one starts), he or she is not intrinsically, essentially, existentially better than anyone else and certainly not more lovable. Most of us nod our heads and say, “yes, yes, of course.” But I fear the opposite of what we say lingers unconsciously deep inside us, and that we indeed often decide who is better and who is worse on the basis of performance.

People like me spend hours and much more than that attempting to diagnose the problems of the church, wondering why the mainline church in the U.S. is shrinking, why it has already become nearly obsolete in much of Europe. We ponder our archaic and confusing scripture, our ancient liturgies and our sometimes-arcane music, and our sermonizing, wondering what will make sermons more interesting, less pious or at the least generally shorter. Each is a good question that asks in its own way if and how we are relevant in the lives of real people. But what I believe more than anything that keeps people away is the sense we somehow give off that we are the only ones who are right, that we are better, holier than everyone else. At St. Bart’s, I truly believe we try hard not to do that; but even we do it so naturally that it is sometimes beyond our consciousness—the certainty implicit in our creedal claims, the often unexamined words of our hymnody, our unthinking familiarity with what to others can feel terribly confusing at least and off-putting at worst. Somehow what we need to convey, which albeit is difficult in so grand a place and in a culture which is very practiced in displaying self-sufficiency, is that we are wounded ourselves, that we are gathered here not as those who have it all figured out but as those in desperate need of one another in our search for God.

The joy that Jesus talked about wanting us to have comes from knowing that what makes us not only okay but beloved is the grace of God. We are not loved because we manage to believe with perfect correctness; we are not loved because we succeed in behaving as faultless Christian soldiers; we are not loved because of our unwavering faith; we are not loved because we are better than Muslims or Jews or Hindus or Baptists or Presbyterians.

“Ain’t nobody better than nobody else.” We are loved because God is God, and God is love. And, that brothers and sisters, is the best news in the whole wide world.

In the name of God: *Amen*.