



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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Respecting the Dignity of All People

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, May 29, 2016
The Second Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Psalm 69:1-9; Luke 7:1-10*

Today I want to talk of something for which we all yearn, but of which we have so little. In our complicated culture, in our divided churches and institutions, and in our politically conflicted nation and world, we all want and desperately need—dignity.

Everyday I ride on the #6 subway train here in Manhattan. Just this morning I looked around at the myriad of passengers—we were no bland mush of humanity; rather, we were a salad of every kind of varied ingredients and textures. If you want to address the challenge of the Christian Gospel—to respect the diversity and dignity of God's creation—get on the #6!

But while respecting dignity, extending hospitality, opening doors to real diversity and inclusion, issuing invitation and belonging to a wide range of God's children are gospel values, negotiating the societal changes and transitions necessary for such an inclusion doesn't always play well in Peoria ... or Atlanta, or Dallas, or San Francisco, or New York.

God's people have readily regarded change and transition as the exception—the occasional happenstance—expecting consistency and predictability to be the norm. In fact, if you take a close look at the history of the people of God, quite the contrary is true. Change and transition are the norm.

I remind us of some of the responses that consistently happen when mores and social arrangements shift:

- + One is that people begin to grumble and to become dissatisfied;
- + A second is that community becomes fragmented, and people become angry at each other. They choose sides and divide into partisan groups;
- + Also, invariably the people tend to blame the leaders for their troubles;
- + Another response is that people become dispirited ... a grand malaise sets in;
- + Another common trait of people caught in seismic shifts is that people want to go back to the "good old days";
- + And finally, people discover that these seismic shifts didn't happen over night ... We discover that they have been simmering for some time.

Last spring I participated in a community forum to respond to these questions: Why has our society become so conflicted? Why do extreme forms of religion flourish? Why have we decided to work out our differences by shouting each other down rather than listening for understanding?

Several speakers waxed poetic with several findings and views. Finally I spoke briefly about people wanting a community of like-mindedness, and that partisan groups form and flourish because people want a sense of security in their self-justifications.

Like a good participant, I mostly listened and took careful notes. I wanted to add to the conversation what I wrote next, but there wasn't time. So, I'm going to tell you this morning:

"Everyday we look around with our eyes and make snap judgments. Or else we quickly confirm prejudices. In places such as our churches, we often look around and see the successful, those well put together, and we make

conclusions. And we see those who are coming apart at the seams, and we sum them up. We also see motives, and we make assessments based on integrity or lack thereof. But we all are complicated; each person has many levels. If when I look in the mirror, I cannot understand the full, complex nature of myself, how in the world can I come to quick conclusions about others? Real understanding and respect take deep measures of maturity and self-awareness. This capacity also requires good, hard work ... but our society is emotionally and relationally lazy, so we resort to harsh critique, projections, name-calling, and blame and shame tactics to justify ourselves."

Today's Gospel text presents the extraordinary faith of one who might well have been excluded by the people of Jesus' day. Luke tells the story of a Roman centurion and of his slave who was healed by Jesus. A Roman Centurion would have had two strikes against him in first century Israel. He was first a Gentile and second he was a symbol of Roman oppression. Yet Jesus, marveling at the Centurion's faith, healed a person of his household. Jesus said that "not even in Israel" had he seen such faith! For the orthodox defenders of the religion of that day, such a statement was blasphemous. The God they worshiped had called them to separateness as the stance for survival.

The message of Jesus in word and deed was not subtle. Jesus embodied a God who was not bound by human definitions. Such a God could not be captured in the sacred traditions of yesteryear, nor be fenced in by time-honored prejudices. In Jesus something new was happening in God's world. As the Psalmist declared: "There will be a time in the future when we will sing a new song in a strange land." And what are the lyrics of that new song we are to sing in the new normal? I believe the words come right out of the Baptismal Covenant. We're asked as followers of Christ: "Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?" Our response is, "I will, with God's help."

Part of the new song we are to sing is "respecting the dignity of every human being."

Human dignity is a precious gift. Without it, people believe they have no personal significance, nothing to contribute to the common good.

In his biography of President Franklin Roosevelt, "FDR" author Ted Morgan describes the Depression-era president's bout with polio and the psychosocial, spiritual and political crisis it precipitated. For a time following his diagnosis, the wealthy and arrogant young Roosevelt abandoned his political goals. The very vocabulary of politics demanded mobility: a candidate "ran" for office with a "running" mate. Roosevelt believed that the indignity of polio and the metaphors of politics had already lost him the race. Morgan believes that Roosevelt's spiritual struggle lifted him from shallow, selfish ambition to become a servant-leader able to identify with the humiliations and defeats of Americans deeply wounded by the Depression. Thus the man who lost and regained his own dignity could help others find theirs.

In Jesus we see the ultimate figure of one who restores dignity to human beings, most often those disenfranchised or written off by society. Through Christ's self-offering love for others, through his healing grace, through his unconditional mercy, people are able to reclaim their lives.

As his disciples, therefore, one of our primary vocations is to respect the dignity of others. Those of us aware of our own shortcomings and limitations find reservoirs of compassion and acceptance for all people. Dignity returns to life when we value others, listen to their stories, enter into their pain. Sometimes just a word, a gesture, an advocacy letter, a contribution, an affirmation can restore the health and wholeness of someone outside the lines of the community.

So we're asked, "Will you respect the dignity of every human being?" May we be found answering, "I will, with God's help."