

“Who Sent You Here?”

a sermon by

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Text: “...but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant” (Mark 10:43).

Several weeks ago the *New York Times* carried a column by Thomas Friedman entitled “Leading By (Bad) Example.” In that article he related a remarkable story about a delegation of Iraqi judges and journalists who were in this country studying the workings of American democracy. Apparently, the group was so appalled by what they witnessed in this country so they cut short their visit and returned home. The lead Iraqi delegate, Muhammad Mithaqi, a noted secular Sunni Judge who had recently survived an assassination attempt by Islamic radicals, said he was stunned by the fact that many people supported the nomination of Harriet Miers for the Supreme Court on the basis of her religion. Mithaqi said that after two years of being lectured by Americans about the need to separate “mosque from state” he was appalled to hear people recommend that someone be nominated to be a Federal Judge on the basis of their religion.

A fellow delegation member, Abdul Wahab al-Unfi, a Shiite lawyer who walks with a limp today as a result of torture in a Saddam prison, said he did not want to spend another day in Washington after listening to the present administration defend its right to torture in Iraq and Afghanistan. Mr. al-Unfi noted that he had survived eight years of torture under Saddam

Hussein. “Virtually, every extended family in Iraq has someone who was tortured or killed in a Baathist prison. Yet, already, more than one hundred prisoners of war have died in U.S. custody. How is that possible from the greatest democracy in the world?”

Another member of the delegation, Sahaf al-Sahafi, the editor of one of Iraq’s new newspapers, said he wanted to go home after watching a televised videoconference between a high American official and a group of soldiers in Iraqi in which the soldiers were being coached by a Pentagon aide in terms of how to respond to this American official. “I had nightmares watching this,” al-Sahafi said. “It was exactly the kind of staged encounter that Saddam used to have with his troops.”

Now, as Mr. Friedman pointed out at the end of his column, this was a fake news story. It didn’t happen. But it could have happened and it raises for us a critical ethical issue that is at the heart of our faith; namely, the power of a good example.

I.

That is certainly the issue that is raised in this portion of Mark’s gospel. The setting for this passage is one of the so called “Passion Predictions” in Mark’s gospels in which he tells his disciples that it is necessary for the “Son of Man to go to Jerusalem where he will be handed over to the chief priest and scribes, condemned to death, mocked, spit upon, killed and after three days rise again” (Mark 10: 32-35). This becomes the occasion for two of the disciples, James and John, to ask Jesus for a personal favor. When he comes into his glory, they would like to be seated on his right and left--the places of power. Jesus told them they didn’t know what they were asking, and they didn’t. They had no idea that when Jesus came into his glory on a cross, he would be surrounded not by James and John, but by two thieves. Furthermore, Jesus makes two allusions to his coming crucifixion by asking them if they were prepared to drink the cup he would drink and be baptized by the baptism that he would be baptized with.

The discussion, which apparently angered the other disciples, (since they were probably jealous) became the occasion for Jesus to speak the words that form the basis of his ethic. “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

II.

One of the astounding aspects of the ethic of Jesus is the remarkable way that his values conflict with ours. Paul Tillich once spoke of the ethic of Jesus as “the transvaluation of values.” The things we thought were great, Jesus viewed as insignificant. The things we think of as insignificant, he thought quite remarkable. He saw more beauty in the lily of the field than in all of the splendor of Solomon’s temple. He found the trust and faith of a small child far more impressive than all of the temple ritual and sacrifice.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the role of money in a person’s life. We constantly admire people who are able to win spiritual victory despite adversity. How do they do it? We ask. Starting with so little, cramped by poverty and circumstance, overcoming great obstacles, we are amazed at the human capacity to overcome humble beginnings.

Jesus, on the other hand, had a very different attitude. He marveled at people who were able to achieve a spiritual victory in spite of wealth. In fact, Jesus went so far as to say that it was easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than a person with wealth to enter the kingdom of God.

But it isn't just about wealth, it is fundamentally about power: the power of knowledge, the power of love, and the power of position. Several weeks ago Arthur Schlesinger wrote a piece in the *New York Times* Book section entitled "Forgetting Reinhold Niebuhr." Schlesinger lamented the fact that we do not have public theologians like Niebuhr who help us face some of the troubling things about our national and public life. Niebuhr debunked the idea of "American Innocence," as if somehow we are a nation of innocent people. He understood the pervasive nature of human sinfulness. He understood that there is sin in our best deeds as well as in our worst.

Many of us think that the ethic of Jesus is for the weak. In fact, it was addressed primarily to the strong."He that is greatest among you," said Jesus, "shall be your servant." Power possessed, dedicated, used, and if need be renounced--that is the central principle of the ethic of Jesus.

III.

Another dimension to the ethic of Jesus was the importance he placed on service. "The Son of Man," he said, "came not to be served, but to serve." There is no sentence that sums up more eloquently the ethic of Jesus than that. He not only said it, he lived it. His whole ministry embodied those words. He ate with tax collectors and sinners. He reached out to touch those with leprosy. On the cross he forgave those who had placed him there.

Some years ago when William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, had died, his funeral service was held in Westminster Abbey. A huge congregation had gathered that included some of the wealthiest and poorest people in London. The Queen was there along with a number of street people. As the casket of William Booth was being carried out of the Abby, a poor woman on the back row stood up and said, "He cared for the likes of us."

That was what the ethic of Jesus was about. One of the great joys that those of us who serve as ministers of this church experience is the remarkable witness of the members of this church who serve in very remarkable ways in the outreach of this church: Loaves and Fishes, Room at the Inn, the Emergency Winter Shelter, Westerly Hills, and a host of others as well. Most of the volunteer jobs here receive little, if any recognition. Most of the people who load groceries, spend the night in the winter with homeless people, tutor in schools, and do a host of other things will not get their picture in the newspaper. But in doing so they provide a powerful witness to the ministry of the church and in the long run there is nothing more powerful than the witness of a good example.

IV.

There is another aspect of the ethic of Jesus. It is the fact that it is an impossible ethic; one that none of us will ever be able to fulfill. Certainly that is evident in the Sermon on the Mount. George Buttrick once told of a man who said that he did not go to church much, but that he did try to live by the Sermon on the Mount. Who among us can live by that? Do we really think we can love our enemies, be loving to those who spitefully use us, turn the other cheek--and listen to this--Jesus says we are to lend and to expect nothing in return. Any bankers here in the congregation? Any lending officers, anyone from the financial aid office at Davidson or Queens? You are to lend and expect nothing in return.

That is why when confronted with this ethic of Jesus we are forced to turn elsewhere to seek another word – a word of forgiveness that reminds us that “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.”

Recently I read the remarks that Elie Wiesel made at the fiftieth anniversary of the commemoration of the liberation of the Auschwitz Concentration Camp. He prayed that God would never ever forgive the Nazis, never forgive the crimes they committed against humanity. It was a chilling, agonizing, and terrifying moment. Now, I think I can understand why someone who had experienced the horror of the concentration camps as a child might have prayed that prayer.

But I could not help but remember another occasion when Dr. Martin Luther King, Sr. preached at the Memorial Church at Harvard University. It was not long after his son had been killed in Memphis. At the beginning of his sermon this is what “Daddy King” said. “Let me tell you at the start, I have no bitterness in my heart.” And then he described how his son had been murdered, another son had drowned, how his wife had been shot at church before his very eyes, and after each of these recitals, with tears in his eyes, he would say, “But I have no bitterness in heart, God won’t allow it.”

In the long run, I think Tom Friedman is right. We will be judged as a nation not by our words but by our deeds. And I think that is true in our own lives as well. I have not tried to be comforting this morning. If this sermon is not a challenge to each of us, it is a failure. Most of us have more power than we can ever imagine. The real question is what we will do with the power we possess.

To be a Christian means that Christ calls us to take this ethic of love into a pagan world--to live by it, believe in it, adventure on it, sacrifice for it, until we make a difference. Power in the hands of love is always the most beautiful thing in the world. Any kind of power--personal, charm, intelligence skill, wealth, leadership--any kind of power in the hands of love is the most convincing thing in the world.