

The Rev. John Morris
Sermon for August 28, 2022
12th Sunday after Pentecost
All Saints Church, Littleton, N.H.

When I was serving an Episcopal congregation in southern Vermont, the Roman Catholic Church was right across the street. I became friends with several of the Roman Catholic clergy, especially Joe Tate. He once told me a story about when he was in the Order of the Holy Cross. He was not ordained, but he was assigned to the Chaplaincy Office at West Point Military Academy. On one occasion, Bishop Fulton J. Sheen was coming to visit the Academy. Sheen was a major television celebrity at that time, which was before the growth of Protestant televangelists. The Chaplaincy Office hosted Bishop Sheen for a luncheon. In attendance was the Head Chaplain, the Assistant Head Chaplain, several other priests, and Joe Tate. At the last minute, the Commandant of the Academy said he would like to attend. There was a problem, because there were not enough seats in the small room where the luncheon was being held.

In light of Jesus' parable about not jockeying for good seats at a banquet (Luke 14:1, 7-14), I can imagine two nice scenarios: (1) The Head Chaplain could have said, "I don't need to be at the head table. I'll just take my plate and go stand by the door." Or (2) Bishop Sheen could have said, "Remember how Jesus said we should be very inclusive in our meals. Let's invite all the kitchen staff to join us and we'll just all eat buffet style."

Neither of those things happened. Instead, Joe overheard the Commandant and the Head Chaplain talking. One said, "Where can Brother Tate sit?" The other said, "Well, I guess he could go eat in the kitchen." At that point, Joe said, "You know, I just remembered another meeting I have. Nice to meet you Bishop Sheen. Good-bye."

Joe chuckled as he told me that story, but it does seem like a sad situation. It could have been a dramatic and faithful way to show Jesus' teaching and way of living. It could have reflected Jesus' challenge to rigid hierarchies and any system that establishes a pecking order. When it came to eating meals, Jesus much preferred to eat with the lowly and marginalized people of his society. If he had been at that West Point luncheon, he probably would have enjoyed hanging out with the kitchen staff instead of spending much time with the people in the Chaplaincy Office pecking order.

Of course, it's easy for me to pole some fun at two of our classic hierarchies: the military hierarchy and the Roman Catholic hierarchy. But we Episcopalians have a lot of be humble about. For example, look at the titles we give to our leaders. Archbishops are called "The Most Rev. So and So." Bishops are called "The Rt. Rev. So and So." Deans of Cathedrals are called "The Very Rev. So and So." Priests and deacons are called "The Rev. So and So." (If we had an Anglican Pope, would we call that person something like, "The Ultimate Very Grandest Rev. So and So?")

Wouldn't Jesus look at this pecking order and say, "What about the people who are not ordained? They are the essentially important part of the Church. Why do they seem to be at the bottom of your holy pyramid?" The Catechism in our Book of Common Prayer tries to deal with this situation. One of the questions is "Who are the ministers of the Church?" The expected answer is "The ministers of the Church are lay persons, bishops, priests, and

deacons." That seems to be the correct order of things, but we don't act out that vision very well.

When I was teaching at an elementary school in southern Vermont, a new Superintendent of Schools arrived and posted on the office wall a chart on how he saw the District. At the top was the Superintendent. Below him was the Assistant Superintendent. Below that was the Central Office Specialists. Then came the Principals, then the Teachers, then other staff in the local schools, and finally, the students. We had a fairly feisty faculty in the school, so as soon as the Superintendent left, one of the teachers took the chart and turned it upside down. Jesus would have been pleased, right?

I once heard the story about the Governor of Rhode Island. He was campaigning for re-election and had very busy schedule one day. He did not have time to eat breakfast, so when he arrived at the small luncheon for him to be held that day, he went through the serving line and said to the waitress near the platter of chicken, "I didn't have any breakfast. I'm really hungry. Could I have an extra piece of chicken?" She replied, "I'm sorry, sir. We have just enough chicken for the people who have been invited to this luncheon." The Governor straightened up and said, "Do you know who I am? I'm the Governor of Rhode Island!" The waitress looked at him and said, "Do you know who I am? I am the Waitress in charge of chicken and you get on piece!" As they say, "You go, girl!"

In Jesus' day, the Temple was the ultimate symbol of the pecking order in the society and in the religion of the day. At the apex of the hierarchy, was the Holy of Holies. Only the Chief Priest was allowed in that space. Then there were places for the other Temple priests. And a section for the other functionaries of the Temple sacrificial system. There was a section for men and a separate section for women. There was another section, outside the main walls, for Gentiles. And then in front of the Temple was the market place where people could purchase things for the sacrificial system. What did Jesus do? One day, he showed up at the Temple, overturned the tables in the marketplace and chased away the animals. He shut down the whole Temple for a day as a protest against the unjust hierarchy that had been built up in the name of God. Quoting the prophet Jeremiah, Jesus said, "You have turned this house of prayer into a den of thieves!" My guess is that some of the onlookers watched in surprise with the mouths open and then said, "Well, you don't see that every day!" (Maybe one of those Chaplains at the West Point luncheon should have turned over a table to make the same point?)

Jeremiah uses a wonderful metaphor in today's First Reading (Jeremiah 2: 4-13). In a very arid country like ancient Israel, sometimes water was stored in large stone cisterns. However, the porous limestone leaked, so plaster on the inside of the cistern was needed to prevent leaks. As Jeremiah berated the religious leaders of his time, he said, "You have spent too much time plastering your cisterns and creating unholy hierarchies. Your structures are leaky and useless. Get rid of them and turn to God, the source of living water." Sometimes, Jeremiah liked to act out his message in dramatic ways. I can imagine him pushing over one of the cisterns, clapping his hands, and saying "Now let's get on with more important things, such as establishing justice for all members of society, welcoming foreigners, caring for the most vulnerable members of society, etc." An onlooker again might say, "Well, you don't see that every day, do you?"

Both Jeremiah and Jesus dreamed of radical equality. We should remember that Jesus is the one who, as a youngster, probably heard his mother singing about how God wants to “put down the mighty from their seats and lift up the lowly.” It’s not surprising that the adult Jesus would go about turning pyramids upside down!

At Jesus’ last supper with his disciples, he took a dramatic step and washed the disciples’ feet. He took the role of the lowliest servant whose job was to wash the first and grime off of the feet that had been out on those dusty and dry roads. Again, Jesus dramatically turned a pyramid upside down, taking on the role of a servant. He then invited all of us to do the same. Hymn #602 in our hymnal is very appropriate as we remember “Jesu, Jesu” who fills us with love and shows us how to serve.

Looking back at my sermon notes, I see that most of the people I have described are men: Joe Tate, the Chaplains, the Commandant, Bishop Sheen, the School Superintendent, and the Governor of Rhode Island. However, there is that Waitress in charge of chicken who balances things out a bit.

Why have I thought mostly about stories about men? Maybe it’s because I am a guy and I am biased toward stories about guys? Or, at a deeper level, maybe it suggests that, in general, men are more invested in hierarchies and pecking orders than are women. A good topic for future discussion.

A final story, and, yes, it is about another man. The Honorable Ernest W. Gibson III was from the closest thing to what might be called a “Vermont royal family.” His grandfather was a Congressman and a U.S. Senator. His father was Governor of Vermont. Ernest served in the state legislature, was appointed to a variety of state boards, and finally was appointed to the Vermont State Supreme Court, where he served for many years. He was a tall, lanky, soft-spoken, and dignified fellow. I got to meet him because he served for many years as the Chancellor of the Diocese of Vermont and was the Parliamentarian at the annual Diocesan Conventions. When Ernest died in 2020, one of his good friends said in the obituary, “He treated everyone—be it a janitor or another Supreme Court Justice--- with respect.”

When Ernest retired from the Court, he and his wife volunteered at Christ Episcopal Church in Montpelier, Vermont, where they were long-time members. They volunteered to help prepare and serve the weekly community meal. All people were invited to the meal, but the meal was especially meant for people who had fallen on hard times. I am told by people at that parish that Ernest and Charlotte almost never missed a meal. When they did show up, though, it was not The Honorable Ernest W. Gibson III and Mrs. Gibson who helped prepare and serve the meal. It was “Ernie” and “Charlotte.” Jesus would have been pleased, right?

Jesus is the one who said, “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled and all who humble themselves will exalted.” May it be so for you.