

5 EpiphanyB – SJ – Be Served or Serve?

Mark 1:29-39 2/5/12

St. John's Episcopal Church, Salisbury, CT

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Ann and I have a couple of favorite TV shows that we enjoy watching. One of them is called *Blue Bloods*. It is about an Irish-American family named Reagan, whose head, Frank, played by Tom Selleck, is the commissioner of police for the city of New York. His father had also once been commissioner of police for the city of New York, two of his sons are officers with the police department of the city of New York, and a daughter is a prosecutor for the city of New York, someone I obviously personally relate to. Friday night's episode, at least in part, dealt with the death of an old friend of Frank's, who had been a hero when both he and Frank had been in the North Tower of the World Trade Center on 9/11. The friend's funeral service takes place in a huge church that I suspect must have been St. Patrick's, and the program ends as Frank, in full uniform, stands in the pulpit delivering his friend's eulogy. He begins that eulogy with the question: "Do you know where you were on 9/11?"

Well, I expect that every one of you has an answer to that question. I know I do. It was about 6:15 in the morning in California and I was in my car driving from my home in Campbell, a suburb of San Jose, to Berkeley for only my second day of classes at seminary, and listening to the unfolding events on, of course, KQED, the local NPR station. Because I was attending class in the morning and going to court in the afternoon, back in San Jose, I was dressed in a tie and jacket, a manner distinctly different from the customary apparel of those attending seminary.

About a week after 9/11 I was in a class that dealt with the sort of meetings the very earliest Christians had, since, of course, they hadn't gotten around yet to churches and regular liturgies, hymns and sermons. Instead they met in homes that were hosted by members and carefully restricted only to followers, since they weren't exactly popular with those who weren't believers. And many of the homes they met in to share communal meals – which was the earliest form of communion – were hosted by women. One of the women members of the class made the point that such a situation was a good illustration that women had a much higher status among these early Christians than they had subsequently – as the Church hardened into a strongly male dominance.

I know now that I would have been much better advised to keep silent, but I couldn't restrain myself. I opined that it sounded to me more like the situation in some churches with which I was familiar, in which the ladies of the altar guild – however important to the functioning of the church they may have been – and that was very important indeed – were, nevertheless, not part of their power structure – which remained in male hands. Perhaps it was the tie and jacket. I'm not entirely sure. But the immediate response to my comment there was a loud chorus of hisses from the women present! I assure you that, despite the fact that I was wearing my court

clothes, I was not trying in any way to suggest that I approved of the situation as I saw it. Actually, I once belonged to a very small church in which I was a member of the altar guild, and, at seminary, all of us shared in those duties. So I neither looked down on the work of the altar guild nor thought of it as the exclusive province of women. I did, however, believe that in some churches – to use a military analogy – men were seen as officers and women as enlisted.

Today's Gospel is a strong reminder that churches that organize themselves on a hierarchical model do so with great peril to the true meaning of Christianity. Let me set the scene for you. Jesus has called his first disciples down at the Sea of Galilee and they have gone to the synagogue at Capernaum, where Jesus has astounded his listeners with the authority of his teachings and has encountered a man who has an unclean spirit – a spirit who recognizes Jesus for who he is and what authority he has. And then Jesus and the two sets of brothers go to Simon's house, the Simon who will later become the chief of his disciples, Peter himself. There he meets Peter's mother-in-law.

It's frankly kind of reassuring to this non-Roman Catholic to hear that the man that Church with its headquarters at the Vatican considers the first Pope was actually married. What isn't reassuring is that this is the only place in the New Testament where we hear about that marriage. Nowhere do we encounter Peter's wife – either during Jesus' ministry or afterward. There is, of course, Mary Magdalene. She is certainly one of those who followed Jesus. And there's his mother Mary. But how does Mark's Gospel end? The two Mary's and a woman named Salome have gone to Jesus' tomb after his death to anoint his body only to discover it gone. There they encountered a young man in white, who told them to inform the disciples, especially Peter, that Jesus would meet them in Galilee. However, overcome with terror and amazement, they fled from the tomb and "said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

That depiction, surely, is some indication of early attitudes about women. The three in this story could have received real praise from the writer of this Gospel, for they were the first to witness the Resurrection. That's got to be meaningful, doesn't it? That they were the first could have had a real impact on the position of women within the church, perhaps nipping the centuries of second-class Christian citizenship in the bud. But instead they are depicted as too afraid even to tell the disciples what they had seen and heard, despite being instructed to do so. And that is where the Gospel abruptly ends – right there, with the terror felt by these three women.

There really is, it seems to me, something terribly wrong with the picture painted of that encounter at the tomb, whatever the first Christians may have thought of the value of the women who later served as hosts for the get-togethers of the early Christian communities. Were those later women equal partners or servants of the male leaders of the early churches? Well, it seems to me that whatever their status

may have been, we know from stories like today's what Jesus would have thought of their service.

Built into the little story about Jesus' encounter with Peter's mother-in-law is a ready response to those who would depreciate the value of women – then or now – thinking of them as servants to the men who ought truly to run the religious show. Jesus goes into her house and finds the lady sick in bed, curing her straightaway. The mother-in-law's immediate reaction to being cured is to begin to serve Jesus and the others. So, yes, she serves, but then so does Jesus serve both her and those who were then brought to him because they were sick. In just these couple of verses is the very center of the religion that Jesus taught. Should women serve? Yes, of course! But so should we all! Here we are at the beginning of Jesus' ministry and we are being introduced to the theme that appears again and again throughout it. Perhaps the best verbal expression of it comes much, much later in the Gospel when Jesus is quoted as saying, "...whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all."

Here, then, at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, with his visit to the home of Peter's mother-in-law, the keynote for his whole ministry is struck. Not only is there nothing inherently inferior in the life of service, but, in fact, we are all called to it; even Jesus, the very son of God, is himself called to it. Think, for example, of the affirmation of the value of service that comes near the end of his ministry, in the foot-washing scene in John's Gospel, which occurs after Jesus' last supper together with his disciples, when he insists on washing their dirty feet – work that would normally, in that society, have been done by the lowliest of servants.

So, back to my initial illustration and question about the hostesses in the early church gatherings and the altar guilds. Have some in the Church through its many years looked down on those in the church doing such work as is done by the altar guild? I don't think there is any question but that they have. But would Jesus himself have been among those that have? Clearly not! We are all called to a life of service – with none more to be esteemed than any other. And may we all, with God's help, live such a life.

AMEN