

**A Kingdom of Nobodies**

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Matthew 23:1-12

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A training I once attended was about up-down, dominant-submissive relationships of men and women, particularly clergy. At one point there was a kind of fish bowl in which different people could go to the center of the room and speak of what was important to them. A woman pastor spoke about how no one ever called her reverend and that she would like sometimes to be called reverend.

A male friend of mine went to the center and referred to today's passage about the need to be servant, to not exalt oneself, to not be called rabbi, father, or master. It turned out to be a dumb thing to quote Jesus on that day. My friend was confronted by one of the facilitators, a highly paid consultant, and accused of being insensitive to women. Worse, he was accused of playing a domineering role in suppressing women and told that the use of this scripture was historically a part of how Christians justified putting women down.

My friend was surprised and hurt. He didn't know what to say that wouldn't be defensive or argumentative so he remained silent.

My friend will be all right. He and I have talked and we learned some things. First we learned it can be dangerous to quote Jesus. Secondly we learned that while men, in order to fight hierarchies, believe they must eschew titles, women believe they must demand titles in order to demand respect from a culture and system which will often only begrudgingly acknowledge their worth.

The system by which titles determine esteem or value is called the honor system. It is based on who has the best title, the best chair, the best house, the best car and so on. We know the honor system is dangerous because titles, chairs, houses and cars can easily disappear. There are those of us who rankle at such shallowness and make attempts at change.

There are men who think they are changing the system of honor when they politely refuse a title and there are women who think they are changing the system when they demand a title. But if a poor man or woman is treated as rich and placed above others then the system of hierarchy has not changed, only the one sitting in the seat of honor. We are

wrongly seduced from the kingdom of heaven when we think that the system has changed if we are given the better or lower seat at the banquet, recognized in the market place, wear our robes and signs of holiness and believe that somehow we are given power by these things. The truth is that the system of oppression still exists; we are only moving chairs on the Titanic.

The system that assigns value by honor is not of the kingdom Jesus saw, but of the kingdom Jesus condemned. Whether we are male or female, Christian or pagan, rich or poor does not matter in God's eyes and should not matter in ours.

The only change that can end domination over others is the way of Jesus who says, "Whoever is greatest among you shall be your servant." The only true title that we might be pleased to receive, if we are to follow the Christ, is faithful servant. The only true place for us at the banquet and in the market is to be among friends and equals, doing the best we can with the gifts we have to make life a little better for everyone. You would think Christians would know this by now and strive to be servants of all. But it is sadly not so.

I am currently reading "Nickel and Dime" by Barbara Ehrenreich. It was written from Ms. Ehrenreich's experiments in 1998 thru 2000 of living as a low wage worker; as a waitress, house cleaner and in sales. It is the story of being the working poor in a nation of the exceedingly wealthy. As a waitress she earned minimum wage only if the tips of her customers doubled her hourly rate. She lived in a dirty trailer which she couldn't really afford. There were no health benefits and her bad back was cared for with four Advils before each shift. She tried to make ends meet by working two jobs but failed from exhaustion.

As a waitress she worked hard to be pleasant, to please and serve well, giving more than the allotted six croutons on a salad and more than the commanded one roll. She found that most waitresses work hard to serve well. At one point she reflects that the customer eventually became the enemy. She writes:

*The worst, for some reason, are the Visible Christians - like the ten-person table, all jolly and sanctified after Sunday night service, who run me mercilessly and then leave*

me \$1 on a \$92 bill. Or the guy with the crucifixion T-shirt (SOMEONE TO LOOKUP TO) who complains that his baked potato is too hard and his iced tea too icy (I cheerfully fix both) and leaves no tip at all. As a general rule, people wearing crosses or WWJD ("What Would Jesus Do?") buttons look at us disapprovingly no matter what we do, as if they were confusing waitressing with Mary Magdalene's original profession.<sup>1</sup>

At the earliest times of Christianity we were known for our servant love and people would say, "Look how they love one another" or "Look how they care for one another." Now the servant world knows those of us that are visible by our stingy and demanding natures. This is not how I want to be known. This is not how I want to be.

I don't want to buy into the honor culture which assigns value based upon salary, title or any of the other trappings of having made it. Yet even as invisible Christians we are quick to be just like non-Christians in our desire for prestige.

I was once serving a congregation that was in the midst of a building campaign. We knew that we had to have some truly major donors to raise the two million dollars we still needed. As we spoke of how we might encourage a large donor it was suggested that we offer to name a room or a wing after them or in memory of someone they chose. We thought of a large plaque near the entrance to our new building that listed Patrons (really big gifts), Supporters (medium gifts) and Contributors (little gifts). It all sounded reasonable.

But then my stomach began to churn because today's scripture had been my meditation scripture for that week and I knew we were contemplating the selling of honor and prestige. The question came to me, "Was I willing to sell the servant way of Jesus for a big contribution?"

A part of the radical message Jesus brought to his culture and ours is that to be truly great is to be a servant to all. The Jesus scholar John Dominic Crossan has titled this "the kingdom of nobodies" for nobody was anybody special in Jesus presence, and everybody was somebody important in God's love.

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich, Nickel and Dimed; On (not) getting by in America, (Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 2001), pg. 36.

Donald Messer, a former president of Iliff seminary, tells the story of William R. Persons:

*When William R. Persons formally retired from the pastoral ministry, his wife spoke on his behalf since he had suffered for the previous seven years from Alzheimer's disease and had moved beyond the realm of ordinary discourse. Mildred Persons traced the joys of their earlier ministry and spoke of the grandeur of climbing some of their career summits. But then she recounted the ugly pain of slowly discovering Alzheimer's and what it felt like to become nonpersons, losing stature and status in the church and community. Instead of being involved and influential in matters, they were marginalized and on the periphery of power.*

*At that point, however, she paused and in a very poignant moment said, "But, the Iliff School of Theology was the one exception. The Board of Trustees kept Bill as a member. He was sent all the materials. Another Trustee picked him up and took him to every meeting, as long as he could physically attend. After one Trustee session, I asked him what happened. He replied, "I don't know, but Iliff still thinks I'm a people."<sup>2</sup>*

At Bear Creek I want us to speak and treat each other as people, as the sacred children of God and God's creation even when our minds are gone. I want us to be disciples of Jesus as the kingdom of nobodies. I pray we are a place where clericalism is exchanged for the priesthood of all believers. I pray we are a place in which it doesn't matter who was a part of the original gang in the elementary school or who is the newest among us, who has the more prestigious job or who struggles to find a job. I pray we are the house of the Lord where all honor is in faithfully serving.

I pray we are a place, and I believe we are, where our children, the most fragile and dependent of God's creatures are of highest importance. I pray we are a place that pushes our personal stewardship and our operating budget to the limit for the edification of disciples and service to the world.

And beyond this building and this congregation, I pray that we are the kingdom of nobodies in our homes and in our

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<sup>2</sup> From the reflections of Don Messier

work where we don't lord our gifts over others but use our gifts to serve the needs of our spouses, our friends, our children, our co-workers and even our enemies.

I want us to find our rejoicing not in the honor code but in being servant to every person and creature, every rock and tree, even the air we breathe and the water we drink. I pray that we are a people where "the greatest among us is the servant of all" and a people that when the waitresses of the world see us coming they too rejoice and are glad.

Amen and Shalom.