

Suffering, Submission, and Servanthood – Really?

I'll never forget one of my most humiliating moments as a parish priest...and there were many! It was "stewardship Sunday" and I was preaching about the need to give sacrificially, to remember that the tithe (10 percent of our income) is considered the standard in the Episcopal Church, and to remember the needs we all knew we had in our congregation. After the service, an elderly woman – faithful and longtime member – came up to me said:

"I'll try to do better, Father. I'm working toward a tithe, but it's hard to make ends meet. But I really will try harder...!" Well, of course, I could feel my face redden. I hastened to assure her that she was doing just fine and that my words had not been directed to her, or people like her, but to those in our parish who quite obviously had plenty in the way of material wealth and yet likely put less than she did in the plate each Sunday.

Well, that was...**awful!** And I vowed to be more careful in how I framed my stewardship sermons in the future! But it did serve to remind me that often our sermons, and even our readings from Scripture, can be heard by the faithful – and certainly by newcomers -- in ways that they were, in all likelihood, not intended to be understood by the preacher, by Jesus, or by the authors of the Bible. I think of that especially today as we listened to Lessons about suffering and submission and servanthood.

In the Wisdom of Solomon we hear of the Suffering Servant who carries out God's will by his suffering. In the Alternative Reading from the Old Testament this morning the prophet Jeremiah speaks of being led "like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter," (Jeremiah 11:19) which the first Christians heard as foreshadowing the death of Christ. The letter of James tells us to submit ourselves to God. (James 4:7) And, in Mark's Gospel (Mark 9:35) Jesus says, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

Now, those of us accustomed to hearing words like these in church perhaps understand that Suffering Servants like Jeremiah were prophets of non-violent protest when they spoke of not resisting or being like a gentle lamb led to slaughter. James was taking on the wealthy and privileged in his community who could well afford to learn about submission to **something** greater than themselves.

And Jesus was chastising his self-serving followers who were vying for privileged positions on his right and left hand and who had yet to learn the lesson about washing one **another's** feet when he spoke of being last of all and servant of all. All good lessons for us!

But what about those in our midst who have had no choice in their lives but to suffer, to be led like a lamb to the slaughter? What about those who have been taught that "submission" to authority is the only way to stay alive? "Be a submissive woman or a submissive slave in order to show your submission to God." What about those who know all too well what it is like to be last of all and servant of all – because that's been their lot in life from the day of their birth? What about them?

Perhaps we all need to remember that, when we hear suffering servants like Jeremiah being led like lambs to the slaughter, they were not above also showing flashes of anger in words like these: "But you,

O Lord of hosts, who judge righteously, who try the heart and the mind/ let me see your **retribution** upon them, for to you, I have committed my cause!" (Jeremiah 11:20-21)

Perhaps we need to remember that the same **James** who counseled submission to God also wrote, "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you." That shows some **initiative** on our part in our relationship with God...not only submission.

And perhaps we need to take special care to remember that the One who counseled being last of all and servant of all lived that reality out in his own life, not because he **had** to or because it was his lot in life, but because he **chose** to!

This is the son of God we're talking about here who (as Paul writes later): "...though he was in the **form** of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be **exploited**, but emptied himself, taking the **form** of a slave..." (Philippians 2:6-7) Jesus **relinquished** power in order to empower others!

Again, none of this is to say that non-violence, or submission, or servanthood, are necessarily bad things. Our hymns and lessons celebrate that today. They're all part of our Christian vocation. But so is **righteous anger**! So is **resistance** to submission (even submission to God sometimes – as Moses and the prophets sometimes show as they dared even to argue with God as part of their very prayers lives!). And so is the refusal to settle for being last of all and servant of all – unless you have **chosen** that Christ-like role – not because someone put you in that place!

We just always need to be sensitive, dear friends, as to how our sacred words may come across to others. We need to be careful to put things in context and not assume that our religious language and our "God talk" is immediately accessible to people of all backgrounds and all experiences.

And through our sermons, and our teaching, and by the way we live our lives, we must be ever-vigilant so that we do not make it **harder** for people to fall in love with God rather than easier.

Because we have become part of the **problem**...rather than part of the **solution**!