

Pent 21, Yr B, Proper 24
10-18-15
All Saints Episcopal Church

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

When I was in high school, I took French for 4 years. I thought that I wanted to be one of those translators at the U.N. like Audrey Hepburn was in the movie *Charade*. I thought it would be glamorous to sit in a little booth, listening on earphones to a diplomat speaking in one language and simultaneously translating what that person said into another language for another diplomat to hear. I did NOT, however, want to find a lot of dead guys in my apartment or a hotel room, like the movie!

Unfortunately, even after four years, I was not very good at speaking French - nor have I been good at any other foreign language. When I went to seminary, I signed up for Greek class, thinking it would be easier because I wouldn't have to carry on a conversation in Greek; I would just need to learn words. I lasted 2 days in the class before I dropped it! And when I went to Guatemala on a diocesan medical mission years ago, all I could manage to learn in Spanish before I went were 2 questions (although they were very important questions): the first was "May I have a cold beer, please?" and the other was, "Where is the bathroom?" Everything else happened during that week by pointing and pantomime.

But the reason that I am able to remember the few things I did learn, is because of repetition. In 3 of the 4 years of French I took, we memorized dialogues - brief conversations between recurring characters that had "exciting" conversations (read lots of exclamation marks) about everyday topics. Think a French version of Dick and Jane. Eventually, I learned the words that were important for me to know in order to understand future conversations, because the dialogues used so many of the same words over and over - and over - again.

Repetition, of course, is the key to learning many things, not just another language. But in preparation for writing this sermon, it occurred to me that the words Jesus uses with the disciples and with us are words of another foreign language - a language that was and is repeated and repeated and repeated - until all of us learn what the words mean and can understand what Jesus is trying to say to us.

Our difficulty in learning this language - this *Jesus language* -- is complicated by the fact that its words sound exactly like the words of our secular language, but they mean different things. Take the word *power*, for instance. In the language of the world, *power* is translated as *force*, or *oppression*, - *influence*, *control*, or *authority*. Jesus was approached by James and John, who asked him an incredibly impudent question. They had become attracted to the secular definition of *power*, and wanted Jesus to tell them he would grant them seats at his right and his left hand. They thought that being in such positions of power would be just what they wanted.

Jesus had just finished telling the disciples again about what was going to happen to him - and the thick-headed disciples still didn't get it! (I can hear my mother's voice saying, "If I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times!" Repetition doesn't *always* work!) Anyway, Jesus was amazed at their lack of understanding. When they heard what James and John were saying, the ten other disciples got mad. So Jesus called them all together one more time, and said, "Look. The rulers of the *Gentiles* use the secular definition of *power*. They *oppress* the people that they rule. They *control* them. That is not the definition of power that we use. We define our words with *Jesus language*. We do not have a ruler who lords his power over us. Our power comes from our baptisms - power from God that makes us all *equals*. So if you want to become great, you must serve others; and if you want to be first, you must be a slave."

Now, to hear that we must become slaves makes us squirm a little bit in our seats. So we need to know that the concept of servanthood or slavery has another dimension in the bible, just like the Jesus language is different from the language of the world. When the image of servant and master is used to portray the relationship between God and persons, it is an image of high praise. To be a servant or slave of the Lord is to enjoy the closest relationship with God. It is not always *easy* to be a servant of the Lord, but it entails an intimacy with God that is unlike any other relationship. God's servants are not downtrodden and oppressed - God doesn't look down upon them. In the community that speaks the Jesus language - the community which is the body - all persons, no matter what their gifts or talents, are equally worthy in God's eyes.

So, what does it mean to use our baptismal power - the power that makes us all equals - how do we do it? One example is to think in terms of the circle as it is

used in many Native American tribes. Native American culture is traditionally a very spiritual one, and for many tribes, the circle is a basic symbol.

The circle is symbolic of equality. In a circle there is no hierarchy; no person is more prominent than any other person. Meetings of some tribes were held in a circle formation, where people were allowed to speak and their words were accepted and respected on an equal basis. A circle surrounding other Native American symbols signifies family ties, closeness and protection. The circle has no break, and that which is contained by the circle cannot be broken. Pow-wows were organized in a series of circles - dancing in the center of a circle formed by drummers and audience and encampments formed in another circle around the gathering. Even dwellings in many tribes were circular.

In a circular culture, each one serves the other; the community is the thing. We have even talked here about the Eastern Church idea that the persons of the Trinity exist in a circular dance, where all partners are equal, and everyone can join the dance.

Now, I know some people don't want to even hear these words, let alone consider the idea. They think when we talk about equality and community and serving the other, we are talking about socialism, or worse, communism. But look at what western culture has done to the idea of the circle. Everything we do is hierarchical. Top to bottom. The top is the head. The head is powerful. In charge. Commanding. Moving on up. The bottom is not a good place to be: the bottom rung, low man on the totem pole, bottom of the heap, taking orders.

We go to meetings and sit at rectangular tables, which have a "head" and a "foot." The important people sit at the head of the table; the workers sit at the foot. At fancy banquets, there is often a "head" table where the really important people sit. In office buildings, the important people get the corner offices and the peons work in cubicles. The important people make millions of dollars while the lowest people on the organizational chart often don't make enough to even support their families. Even the church is a traditional hierarchy of top-down structure.

But I am not talking about the 'isms' of bygone eras - I am talking about God's community. Is it worth it to look at what our lives might be like if we really did choose to serve others instead of spending our time worrying about how others can serve us? We have only to do those things that over the last month we have been

saying in the renewal of baptismal vows we will do to know what they would be like: to continue in fellowship, in coming together to celebrate and in prayer; in resisting evil and in returning to God; in proclaiming Good News by the example of your life; in serving all persons; in striving for justice and peace, and giving dignity to all.

Jesus uses the image of slavery, not to impose it on us like a tyrant, but in order for us to be able to imagine choosing to serve others. It is an attitude that we can choose for ourselves as a form of discipleship, as a way of saying, "I have no goal in life beyond bringing out the best in others." Jesus doesn't force us to be his slaves; he sets us free to choose to be slaves of all. What will you choose?