

5th Sunday after Pentecost - 5 July 2009 - Proper 9 B
2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10; 2 Corinthians 12:2-10; Mark 6:1-13
James V. Stockton

19th century American poet and author Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote, "Our American eagle is very well, indeed. Let us protect it here and abroad," he wrote. "But let us also beware of the American peacock." At this time of the annual celebration of our nation's hard-won independence, the scripture appointed for today are at least a happy coincidence. They speak to every Christian of the marks of genuine ministry, but also of qualities more widely recognized by many Americans as marks of genuine leadership.

The story of David shows that he is a reluctant draftee to the throne. Read his story in the two books of Samuel. David goes out of his way to avoid usurping the throne from King Saul, or even showing Saul the slightest disrespect. David ignores Saul's petulant refusal to recognize David as the rightful king. Other than simply staying far enough away from Saul that Saul cannot actually kill him, David endures Saul's slanders and threats with respectful pity. Until, finally, Saul's stubborn rejection of God's sovereignty and the people's will leads him ever more deeply into the negative consequences of the path that he has chosen.

Engaging a battle that he never should have entered, Saul is wounded. Then, unwilling to return to the people defeated and wounded, Saul takes his own life. Even after his death, Saul's allies and relatives continue trying to ignore the clear design of God and the will of the people, but eventually, as we hear today, the people turn again to David; and finally David agrees to serve them as their king. And here is perhaps the lesson for people today and of every age. David seeks to serve both the people and God. And this means that, for David, true leadership equals true humility. In those long seasons of his putting it off, delaying it, questioning it, David shows people in his day and in ours that true leadership is not about a strutting pompous display or the shrieking of commands. It is about the quiet exercise of the service to which one is called.

I read a story about a monastery and monk and his abbot who lived there. The monk is new, still a

Novice. He is Br. Gregory. His Abbot is Fr. Dominic, and Fr. Dominic knows that Br. Gregory has been avoiding some of the duties of his formation in the Order. "Fr.," please Gregory, "I'll do any sort of menial labor, I'll scrub floors, I'll pull weeds, I'll polish the silverware; just please don't ask me to preach a sermon in the chapel." Fr. Dominic listens closely to the lad. "I understand," he says, "and I know just what you need to do." "Tomorrow, Brother," he continues, "you will lead the service in the chapel and you will preach the sermon." Br. Gregory struggles to keep from dropping through the floor. "Yes, Fr.," he says. He spends the night praying about what he will do.

It is an uncommon definition of leadership that emphasizes hesitancy toward its privileges. And for this reason, I think, the one who leads by serving will always have both zealous fans and severe critics, with few people left somewhere in between. The Apostle Paul is such a one. And struggles with what he will do. His own letters to the early Church tell us of his high ambitions. A Hebrew by birth, and a trained expert in scripture and in scholarly commentary about it. Paul is on the fast track to prominence and power. He rises quickly by opposing with special vigor the new Jesus sect that is disturbing all the orthodox traditional understandings of the faith.

But Paul meets Jesus, literally, yes, but more important, he meets Jesus spiritually and philosophically. Though Paul seems in most of his letters to be, shall we say, highly opinionated, and though this is borne out in the descriptions of Paul's ministry captured in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, yet, here in this reading for today, we hear an alternative side of Paul, one that has learned the virtues of self-doubt for the sake of true service and leadership. He describes 'a person in Christ who was caught up to the third heaven.' And though he puts it into the third person he is almost certainly speaking of himself. And all because he wants to move himself out of the way of the grace of God; all because he wants nothing of his many and great accomplishments to obscure the more important accomplishments that God is able to achieve through him, when Paul is able to

embrace the concept that 'power is made perfect in weakness;' that 'God's grace will do.'

God's grace will do. It's the reason that Jesus tells his followers, 'Don't take extra things with you. No extra clothing and no extra shoes, no extra money and no extra food.' Go on into the world around you and know that for you, God's grace will do. 'And,' says Jesus, 'wherever you are, if you find there no vehicle through which God's grace may move toward you, no one to offer you a friendly welcome, then know that you have done your part. 'Move on from there, and know that as for you, so also for them: God's grace will have to do.'

Br. Gregory goes to chapel the next day. At the appropriate time, he moves to the pulpit. Nervous, he looks out over the assembly of monks. "Brothers," he begins, "do you now what I am going to say to you?" The shake their heads in the negative. "Neither do I," says Br. Gregory. "Let's stand for the Peace. The Peace of the Lord be always with you." Afterward, the abbot is furious. "I'm going to give you another chance," Fr. Dominic tells him. "Tomorrow, you're leading the service again; and you *will* offer the sermon."

The next day, Br. Gregory again enters the pulpit. "Brothers," he begins, "do you know what I am going to say?" This time the monks all shake their heads in the affirmative. "Since you already know what I am going to say," he continues, then there's no point in my saying it." "Let's stand for the Peace." Afterward, Fr. Dominic is livid. "Brother Gregory!" he says, "tomorrow you'll do as I've directed, or I'll confine you to solitude and prescribe a fast of bread and water."

The disciples are looking back over their time with Jesus. They are realizing that Jesus was a leader and a servant whom they hardly ever understood, who was hardly ever really understood either by his closest friends, or by his most zealous enemies. They recall, Jesus has no driving need for acclaim or power. Though his authority truly is from heaven, Jesus does not strut about to demonstrate his status. But pretty much everyone else who tries to claim authority over the people does exactly this, and so these are the ones who are most offended by Jesus.

Author Thomas Wolfe said it well with the title of his famous novel: *You Can't Go Home Again*. Maybe if it had been a complete stranger who comes to Jesus' boyhood hometown with the fantastic claim that the Kingdom of God is among the people, maybe then it would be interesting to consider. But this is Jesus. They remember him from the time he was playing in the street with their own children. How dare he now presume to speak to them of things so sophisticated and mysterious as their relationship with God? "A prophet is honored," Jesus observes, "except by neighbors, friends, and family."

Br. Gregory has one last chance. He enters the pulpit, and gazes out upon his fellow monks. "Brothers," he begins, "do you know today what I am about to say?" Some of them shake their heads 'Yes,' and some shake their heads, 'No.' Fr. Dominic draws his breath sharply. "There lies the sermon, Brothers," Gregory continues. "Let we who know tell all who do not. Now, please stand for the Peace." And Fr. Dominic smiles.

Independence Day reminds us every year of those persons rightly prominent in our nation's history. So, if there is within people a strutting peacock, be it an American one, a Christian one, or both; if there is within people, you and me included, a petty aspiration to titular leadership, let this Independence Day remind us also of the sanctity of all those who without power to lead simply embraced the freedom to serve. An American virtue? I hope so. A Christian virtue? I know so. There is within us all a nobility that chooses service others even at the cost of our own anonymity. God calls us to know it, and to tell those around us who do not. It is a nobility of holy origin, ready to raise sacred head; ready in your life and mine quietly, powerfully, to lift its graceful wings, and soar.

And so may Almighty God, by whom all liberty is given, grant that we and all the peoples of this land may have grace enough to sustain our freedoms in righteousness and share them in peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, One God, for ever and ever. Amen.