

The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 24
Year B (BCP Lectionary)

Sunday, October 22nd, 2006

Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California

On Pecking Orders and Servants
by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

As a gift for my 10th Christmas, my grandparents gave me the Golden Field Guide to Birds of North America, with a lovely inscription reflecting one of their most passionate avocations:

Within these pages is a lifetime of joy and discovery.

Amongst her many stories about watching birds, Grandma often told the story of waking up one morning in Northern Michigan and seeing a family of snowy owls perched on a power line in a neat row – beginning, presumably, with the parents, and then proceeding down the birth order from the oldest to the youngest. . . a neat row of owls and owlets – a pecking order – blinking in the early morning sunshine as the little ones prepared to fledge.

Funny what a row of owlets can teach us about it ourselves. And it's funny how language works. "Pecking order" is really a birder's term, isn't it? But story of my grandmother's vivid memory – the excitement in her voice tinged with laughter as she told me about the birds all lined up as if on display. I think she saw in those owls a reflection of ourselves. . . an icon of the highly organized social structures that run throughout the natural world. . . and also run in human history and society across the ages.

When I was studying Japanese at Soko Gakuen in San Francisco, one of my professors explained the hardship of attending social events in Japan. If you get a group of Japanese strangers together in the same room and expect everyone to begin engaging in small talk, you risk being met with a long, awkward silence. Few dare to speak first. . . they might end up using the incorrect *keigo*, the honorific language. A polite person in Japan assiduously avoids speaking down to someone more senior, or up to a peer or someone who might be junior.

And, so the game begins. When the conversation finally begins to move, the first questions involve a coy and careful set of queries, as in, "When did you graduate from university?" or "How long have you worked at this company?" And once seniority, rank, and status are established – once the social hierarchy order is discerned and the correct *keigo* adopted by both sides – people begin to relax and the conversation can flow freely.

Now in the United States. . .

Well, we are far less careful. . . even a bit messy! No *keigo* here. We pride ourselves on our democratic values, appreciate people from our pastors to our Presidents who talk "our language," just as though they might be someone from next door or around the corner. We get

uncomfortable about formalized pecking orders, and we tend, at least at the surface, to have a cultural disdain for social hierarchy.

Come to think of it, maybe being Episcopalian – or part of any liturgical church, for that matter – is slightly strange in America. When we tend to pecking orders with vestments, processions, and privileged authority. . .

Well, let me put it this way: here on Sunday morning at Church of Our Saviour, we count ourselves blessed if 100 people show up. Head way south to Lake Forest and Saddleback church, and thousands show up to listen to Rick Warren, who talks like the guy next door (no big formal liturgy), and who's Sunday best is a tropical print with the top button undone. Not that we have ambitions of becoming Mill Valley's megachurch, but this illustrates the point of how we Americans pride ourselves on being casual, democratic, and feeling as equal as possible in our discourse.

The dark underbelly of this democratizing culture is, of course, that it can and does cover the less savory realities of our nation's still stubbornly robust social order: that we are still very stratified. There *is* a pecking order in this country – a social hierarchy. Just head over the bridge to San Francisco. The great liberal, enlightened mecca of the West is among the most racially and socio-economically segregated of cities. And even the neighborhood names betray the real order of society in San Francisco. It behooves one to live in Pacific *Heights* rather than the *Inner* Richmond. Go high up on Nob Hill or Twin Peaks rather than the tough neighborhoods of the Bayview. Stick to the *Upper* Fillmore rather than the *Lower* Fillmore. I think you get the drift.

It's this duplicity, quite frankly, that tends to get us in a bit of trouble if we're not careful.

We even tend to have this duplicity in the church. I caught myself doing it the other week, in a conversation about this very pulpit, my democratizing notions took over and I tried to dismiss the hierarchical imagery that this piece of liturgical furniture poses, and instead shrugged my shoulders noting that it makes it easier for you to hear me! Yeah, right, Richard. Pull the other one. . .

Pecking orders are, by nature, quite human. And present everywhere on this small planet is a social order and ranking, whether we're talking about ants or honeybees, owls or elephants, chimps or people.

We should give a bit of credit to James and John in today's Gospel for their brazen honesty. What could be more natural than to ask where they are in the pecking order of the apostles? I imagine the others were annoyed at them, but not out of righteous indignation. James and John likely articulated a very human worry and desire – just where did they stand? – a question that the other apostles were simply too afraid to admit to Jesus.

Even in the United States, we spend a great deal of energy and time on trying to figure out where we stand on the social ladder – even when we say to others casually that we don't really care. Of course we do. It matters to us if we are thought of by others as decent and upright. We worry about getting ourselves or our children into the right schools. It matters to us whether or not we

have enough to live up to our standard of comfort, and we pursue careers with that at least somewhere in our priority list. We have to admit that we expect to be recognized for our achievements in the workplace, school, or at home.

Even in our Church, we are ever tempted to be in “the know” about what’s going on, or on the right committee or body, with a secret hope that we might have a leg up in the local ecclesiastical pecking order.

James and John remind us that this is nothing new. It’s in the cultural water everywhere. It’s in our history. It’s in our genes. Jesus understands this as well. In the words of today’s reading from the Letter to the Hebrews, Christ sympathizes with this weakness, which is one reason, at least, that James and John *don’t* get tossed out of the community for being so self-centered.

And Jesus, knowing what’s on the heart of the rest of the apostles, and knowing how all this concern about pecking orders stands in the way of the Gospel, chides all of them. . .and us, too. . .with the radical strangeness of the Good News:

. . .that it’s time for the pecking order game to end. That the social climbing we all participate in can no longer be the central priority of this new community, this new creation that Jesus is forming with his band of followers.

Servanthood

Today’s reading from Isaiah underscores one of the earliest and central themes in the Christian community – that an essential aspect of Christ’s incarnation in our midst is as a servant.

The “suffering servant” in Isaiah, while probably originally intended as a metaphor for ancient Israel, is so clearly for us an image of Christ. . .and with good reason. The authors of the gospels leaned heavily on the images of Isaiah as they described Jesus’ life, ministry, and passion. And today’s gospel speaks, too, right out of that tradition.

Jesus demands that the pecking order be turned over on its head, and that the greatest is not the one with the most prestige, the most stuff, or the most power. . .but the one who serves best.

Yet we tend to stumble over this passage. “Servant” in our culture calls to mind household servants, slavery, a lack of dignity and independence, lowliness. . .and even the terrifying “doormat” that none of us wish to become, and many of us are ashamed of when we remember being that way on occasion. The idea of servanthood simply offends our basic democratic notions of the way things ought to be.

But keep in mind that Jesus was never a doormat. He stood up to the religious authorities who tried to lord it over him and others in his own day. He brazenly spoke the truth wherever it needed to be heard or articulated. He healed and proclaimed Good News to everyone, rich and poor alike. Even when faced with the threat of the cross, he continued to confront the powers of his age and their hubris, refusing to blink even in the face of death.

The servanthood to which God in Christ calls you and me is not one of passivity and submission, but rather a commitment to radical love, inclusion, and the truth that is the word of God in our lives, “living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword. . .” that cuts beneath all the games of pecking orders and power and binds together a community of justice, hope, and peace.

It’s a servanthood that forgets all the selfish clamor with which we are so often enraptured, and demands an outpouring of life so that others might live, and live abundantly. It’s a servanthood that sets aside all pretense, where being polite is not a way of getting ahead, but a way of moving more deeply into transformative, nurturing relationships with other pilgrims in this journey called life.

It’s a servanthood that raises up the little child and visits the sick, gives lavishly to those in need, and hears first the desperate pleas of those who struggle.

It’s a servanthood that listens to the cries, joys, and patterns of the earth, the creatures around us, and our interdependence with the city dweller, the farmer, the owl, the tree, and the stars.

This is Good News indeed. So when the pecking orders of our world call you with their siren song, take heart. Jesus knows that game, and speaks directly to it.

It is not to social prestige we are called, but to servanthood – the servanthood of the broken bread and the shared cup, the servanthood that recognizes our oneness in God and lovingly stands up to all the forces that try to tear us apart. We Christians are, at the end of the day, a new community of servants to a world in need and each other, or we are nothing. And God earnestly wants to love that community of servants into being. . . when it is wounded, God sends healing. . .when it loses direction, God calls it back as a mother calls her children home. . .and when it dies, God, the maker and re-maker of the Cosmos, raises it from the dead into glorious life.

And in this is truly an eternal lifetime of joy and discovery.

Amen.