

The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
October 18, 2015
Proper 24, Year B

E. Bevan Stanley

Job 38:1-7, (34-41)
Hebrews 5:1-10
Mark 10:35-45

Jesus said, “Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.” In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Slavery is horrible. The bloodiest war Americans ever fought was to get rid of slavery. The central story of the People of God is the story of how God rescued us from slavery under Pharaoh and led us into freedom. Paul writes that “for freedom Christ set us free.” We were slaves to sin, and Jesus set us free. So what do we make of this saying of Christ? If we want to be great in the kingdom of heaven, we need to be slaves.

As I try to puzzle this out, the first thing that comes to mind is the question of who is making me a slave. If I am forced to be a slave by force or conquest, if my service to another human being is forced upon me by fear of injury or death, then I am oppressed and can legitimately desire salvation from that state. On the other hand, if I am free and choose to serve another without remuneration or expectation of repayment, then I am giving myself freely to that person. These are two very different kinds of service.

In fact, I cannot truly give myself to another unless and until I am free from compulsion from other people or forces. For Freedom Christ set us free. And Christ set us free so that we might give ourselves to others in love and service. To use a different metaphor, we were dead in our sins, and Christ gave us new life in forgiveness. Now we are to give those lives away for others, for the Gospel, and for God.

This is the great mystery of life. God gave us our lives. We are free to do with them whatever we want. The greatest of us give those lives away. And when we give our life away, we find an even better life is given to us.

Think of those whom we regard as heroes. First we may think of those who literally allowed themselves to be killed for others. The New York City firemen on 9/11 come to mind. Or those who gave their lives to advance a cause—soldiers who died fighting against Hitler. Or those whom Abraham Lincoln described as having given “the last full measure of devotion” on the bloody field of Gettysburg. But we can also think of those more peaceful heroes, Francis, Patrick, Augustine, Teresa of Avila, Thomas Ken, Sojourner Truth, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Each of them gave his or her life away as well. They gave it to their Lord Jesus Christ in the specific work they were called to perform. The word “dedication” comes from the Latin verb “to give.” When we say someone is dedicated, we mean he or she has given themselves away to some task, commitment, or cause.

So what about us? To what do we give ourselves? To what do we give our lives? We may give them to providing for our families. We may give them to make good use of our talents. We may give them to make the world a better place. We may give them to help people who need help. Or, we may give them to maximize our own pleasure. We may give ourselves to the pursuit of financial gain, or power, or praise. And what would it mean to give our lives to God?

Maybe it would mean, giving our selves to helping establish the Kingdom of God on earth. Maybe it would mean giving our lives to the work of reconciliation among people who are in conflict. Maybe it would mean giving ourselves telling others of God’s love and power.

Whatever form our self-giving may take, it always begins with God’s gifts to us. First of being itself—the creation. Then of our lives. Then of our families, our talents, our circumstances.

Our giving is rooted in our thankfulness to God for what we have received. Our freedom to become servants comes from our gratitude to God.

Now the thing about giving ourselves away, is that there is no guarantee that the outcome will be what we desire. For the recipient is just as free as we. This is God's risk too. When he made us free to love each other and God, he also made us free not to love each other or God. The Welsh poet, RS Thomas, has God telling of the creation:

And having built it
 I set about furnishing it
 To my taste: first moss, then grass
 Annually renewed, and animals
 To divert me: faces stared in
 From the wild. I thought up the flowers
 Then birds. I found the bacteria
 Sheltering in primordial
 Darkness and called them forth
 To the light. Quickly the earth
 Teemed. Yet still an absence
 Disturbed me. I slept and dreamed
 Of a likeness, fashioning it,
 When I woke, to a slow
 Music: in love with it
 For itself, giving it freedom
 To love me: risking the disappointment.

Giving it freedom to love me; risking the disappointment. Yet God deemed that risk worth taking. Jesus deemed it worth taking the same risk when he gave his life for the world. And we are called take the same risk in giving ourselves to others, to the world, and to God in love.

Or consider the earliest poem written in the English language, Caedmon's Hymn:

Now we must praise the Ruler of Heaven,
The might of the Lord and His purpose of mind,
The work of the Glorious Father; for He,
God Eternal, established each wonder,
He, Holy Creator, first fashioned the heavens
As a roof for the children of earth.
And then our Guardian, the Everlasting Lord,
Adorned this middle-earth for men.
Praise the Almighty King of Heaven.

God gives to us lavishly. We receive with unabashed joy and delight. Then we give all that we have received including ourselves away in praise and love, recklessly and with abandon. And then we receive even more back. And then we give even more away. This is the Christian life. This is the way of God. This is how we find joy. This is how we please God. This is how we build the Kingdom. This is how we live and die and live. This is how we are slaves to the world and to God. This is how the last become first, and the least become the greatest of all.