

Prayer: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Strength, and our Redeemer. Amen.

Sermon: My sermon this morning is based upon our Gospel Lesson, and its closing words where Jesus says: "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

When I was young and idealistic (the latter trait still being with me), I was keen on learning about pastors and congregations that were both creative, and attentive to the Gospel. One pastor whose ministry caught my attention was the Rev. Gordon Cosby, founding pastor of the Church of Our Saviour in Washington, D.C. Rev. Cosby, upon returning home from World War II, was determined to establish a church whose members would be involved in two journeys - deepening spirituality, and community service. Church of Our Saviour became and remains a remarkable church. It was the first integrated congregation in then segregated Washington, and one of the few churches in its time to commit to radical inclusivity. To join Church of Our Saviour, one had to commit to participating in both the worship and missional life of the congregation, often working with homeless individuals at shelters, and at the church-run hospice and medical clinic. This level of commitment was unusual among mainline Protestant congregations, but the church flourished. Books were written about the church, and soon Cosby began receiving invitations to speak from all across the country. He turned them down for Cosby wanted his church to remain small - no more than 200 members, lest it lose its sense of community and commitment. Over the years, the congregation has spun off eight similar congregations, and has established some 40 service agencies in the city. One of those agencies is Christ House, a medical facility for the homeless of the city. It was there that in 2013 Rev. Cosby died, lying on a simple bed - his wife Mary at this side, surrounded by the unhoused people he had loved and served for a lifetime.

As he lay dying, with the help of his faithful assistant Rebecca Stelle, Cosby wrote a brief sermon to be shared with his community after his death. In this sermon he said, "*As I am dying, I am seeing in a new way. I am seeing that weakness is a gift. . . Now my wife and I live in a little hospital for homeless men. Every day we are in the midst of them, in the midst of the ones that Jesus said would be first.*

Dying helps us to see weakness, and weakness is where God's strength is made perfect. It is not until we are utterly bereft of confidence in ourselves that we believe in weakness. Until then, we resist weakness. . . In dying, I've been given the gift of seeing. I want to give others the gift of seeing before it is too late, before it is too late for the world."¹ Gordon Cosby, dying at age 95, comes to see

¹ "Warning: The last shall be first: Who is this leader who issues this warning? Do we even begin to believe that he's the Christ?" by [Gordon Cosby](#), with Rebecca Stelle. Reprinted in the Christian Century, March 24, 2014.

the beauty of weakness, and to understand the message that Jesus gave to his disciples - 'that to become great, one must become least of all.'

We've been reading a lot about Jesus lately, as Mark's gospel has been taking us along the path that Jesus trod in his last weeks of life. In this Sunday's lesson, the disciples are walking with Jesus on the road to Jerusalem. As they walk, James and John ask Jesus for a favor. "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." Scholars have imagined lots of reasons for this request, but most agree that these two disciples are ambitious - they aspire to be leaders in God's realm, and want their ambition to be honored 'when Jesus comes into his glory.' In our time, such ambition would be honored and respected. 'If we don't advocate for ourselves - if we don't put ourselves forward, who will do it for us?' we might ask. Now, as our nation is nearing its election, we are hearing from numerous individuals who aspire to be leaders. They talk to us of their ambitions and skills. And we faithfully elect as leaders those who aspire to greatness, who have ambitions that we can respect. In contrast, Jesus teaches his disciples - ancient and modern - that the Kingdom of God is unlike any kingdom on earth. 'Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.'

This vision of a realm in which humility, servanthood, and quiet faithfulness is honored, has often been lost on the church. As the Christian church became more powerful and influential, it found itself quietly aligning its goals with those of the most powerful of earthly kingdoms. Both Roman Catholic Popes and Puritan leaders adapted their beliefs to the colonizing spirit of the times. The 15th Century Papal Bull, "Inter Caetera," better known as the 'Doctrine of Discovery,' proclaimed that 'any land not inhabited by Christians was available to be "discovered," claimed, and exploited by Christian rulers, and . . . that barbarous nations (may) be overthrown and brought to the faith itself.' The Bull, which has lately been repudiated by the Roman Catholic church, gave doctrinal support to the ambitions of powerful governments everywhere, and led to what we now in America recognize as genocide against the native peoples of this land. It legitimized colonial conquests in the Americas, Asia, and Africa. Not long after the mining corporations and British armed forces had taken control of what is now known as Zimbabwe, the churches arrived - the Church of England, Methodists, and Congregationalists. The churches, it can now be seen, cooperated in the colonizers' program of delegitimizing native culture and religious practices, disrupting polygamous marriages, promoted stereotypes of natives as lazy and morally under-developed, and supported the colonizing government and its distribution of Zimbabwe's abundant natural resources. In short, instead of placing its 'hand in the hand of the man who stilled the waters,' the church placed its 'hand in the hand' of emperors, kings, and industrialists to achieve its goal of evangelizing the world.

It was against the backdrop of colonialism and western cultural superiority, that the New Hampshire Conference UCC began conversations with the United Church of Christ in Zimbabwe to develop a relationship (or kinship) partnership that would transcend typical Africa /America partnerships

wherein the rich benefit the poor, the powerful lift up the weak, and the knowledgeable educate the unknowing. In a series of conversations, the leaders of the two denominations developed a covenant in which they committed themselves to:

- ❖ Share with each other.
- ❖ Learn from each other about the spiritual, mental, and physical needs of our members.
- ❖ Grow together in our faithful response to our call to witness and ministry.

Our congregations have since discovered that *sharing* from our abundance with people living in an impoverished land is a rewarding part of the covenant, and comes quite easily and naturally to us. Thus, over the past 28 years, we have sent numerous shipping containers full of books, computers, sewing machines, medical equipment and supplies, and so on. We have raised funds to purchase food supplies when Zimbabwe was stricken with a severe drought, and funds to drill deep wells so that the schools and churches of the UCCZ would have clean water. This *sharing* from our abundance is something we could do, and could do well, and it felt good. Yet, sharing from our abundance is something that wealthy people have often felt good about doing - it doesn't ask much of us, and it allows us to retain that feeling of 'being on the side of the angels' that comes when the wealthy do good things for the poor.

Not so easy, however, was the part about receiving from them. What did Zimbabweans have that we might need; what gifts could they offer to help us through our own hard times? Over the years, and through the experience of many exchanges, we've received many good gifts from them - generous and warm hospitality, the experience of vigorous and lively multigenerational worship, their love and respect for education, and their fervor in growing the church. We have marveled at the absence of public anger in a land of great governmental corruption, and the lack of suspicion of white people who have historically diminished their dignity even as they were robbing them of their resources. In short, we find ourselves amazed that a people could be such good Christians in the midst of such challenging circumstances. Our Ukama partnership will always be a work in progress, but we honor that kinship today for the gifts we have given and received.

Coming back now to the teaching of Jesus that 'whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all,' I find myself wondering if I could ever become the kind of disciple Jesus described. It's not an easy thing for a proud white male in modern American to become a 'servant to all.' You may recall watching the summer Olympics, and the athletes running the hurdles. You may have marveled, as I did, that they could race down the track, scarcely breaking stride as they leaped over hurdle after hurdle. But hurdles are a problem for those who take seriously Jesus' call to servanthood. I start running down the track of Christ-like living, and almost immediately run into the hurdle of pride, then get tangled up in the hurdle of impatience, and then come the hurdle possessions that I can't put aside! And so I ask myself, how can I ever run a race of faith when I keep getting waylaid by these hurdles! And then I wonder about you

"Servanthood"
John 10:35-45

and your race of faith. What hurdles do you find in your path as you seek to run the race as Christ's disciples? And then what hurdles do we as a congregation encounter when we aspire to be the kind of church we believe Christ is calling us to become?

So, we've come full circle. Not with a load of answers, but with some impressions: Gordon Cosby's insight that there is beauty in weakness; Jesus' word that greatness comes through servanthood. I'm wondering - have you found beauty in moments of weakness? Have we as a congregation found moments of beauty? If so, may we share it with one another. Amen.

Property of Rev. Richard Slater