

Lord, teach us how to live
16 Pentecost, Year B, 2009
 September 20, 2009

Bowser meets Fido at the food bowl one morning, just after their master has poured a big scoop of tasty beef nuggets into the bowl. Both dogs are starving. Bowser looks at Fido and says, “Fido, why don’t you eat your fill? I’m sure there’ll be enough left over for me when you’re done.”

Now you all know that I made this story up. You know because you know that dogs can’t talk or at least we can’t understand their language. But we also know I made this story up because dogs don’t act so generously with one another. What’s this *Fido, why don’t you eat your fill* nonsense? Bowser and Fido would be in there fighting it out to see who could get the most food. Because that’s just the way dogs are. And left to their own devices, that’s the way people are too.

There’s been a lot in the news lately about rude and self-centered behavior. Not between Fido and Bowser, but between famous people. Congressman Joe Wilson, rapper Kanye West and tennis star Serena Williams have all been in the headlines for their less-than-polite actions.

According to one writer, this outburst of rudeness and self-centeredness isn’t confined to the rich and famous, who think they’re entitled to have their way. There are many people out there, in all walks of life, who think they’re more significant than they really are. The psychologists have a name for the problem. It’s called *narcissism*, a condition that gives you an exaggerated sense of self-importance, and a feeling of being entitled to do whatever you want, whenever you want to do it no matter whom it hurts.

The self-centered rarely think about the consequences because they’re too busy claiming what they see as their rightful place in the spotlight. And when they’re criticized for letting their narcissism get the best of them and face the wrath of their colleagues or the disapproval of their fans, they might apologize because it’s the politically correct thing to do. Think of famous politicians like Governor Mark Sanford or Senator John Edwards, who only showed remorse after their adultery was exposed. Or singer Chris Brown, who tried to punch out his famous girl friend, Rihanna, then had the nerve to play the victim on Oprah’s TV show. You can add other names, I’m sure, to this list, but the real question is: how did this plague of self-centeredness get into our culture?

Some people blame talk radio, or internet blogs, or even computer sites like Facebook, but maybe these at worst are more symptoms than causes. I like what the writer I mentioned above said about all this: “I’m old-school. I believe that what matters most is not what happens at your computer but around your dinner table. When we consider the reasons for this rash of self-centeredness, I think most of it comes down to just one thing: bad parenting.”

In other words, people are more self-centered today because they haven’t been taught otherwise. What this commentator didn’t note was how this growth in self-centeredness seems to coincide with the decline in church attendance in America over the past two generations. Fewer and fewer people have had the teachings of Jesus to guide them away from the Bowser-and-Fido way of behaving. Without being taught otherwise, our natural narcissism and self-centeredness – thinking of ourselves first, grabbing for all the gusto we can in this dog-eat-dog world, climbing the ladder of success, being number one, the top of the heap, doing it our way – has always gotten the best of us.

And our Gospel lesson today makes that clear. As we pick up the story today, Jesus and his disciples have been on the road for nearly three years, and he’s been teaching them all along the way. Now they’re headed for Jerusalem, where Jesus is preparing to do the most un-self-centered act you can imagine. He’s about to allow himself to be, as he says in today’s Gospel, “*betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him.*” He’s doing this for the salvation of the whole world, and the price would be great.

But, as the text says, the disciples did not understand what he was saying. When you are soaked in narcissism and self centeredness, absorbed in your own self interests, caught up in your own agenda, it’s not easy to understand someone willingly doing something so radically unselfish as giving his life for others. In fact, after Jesus told his followers about what would happen, while they were walking, the disciples were going at it with each other, arguing about which of them was the greatest. The way they saw it, this

Jesus was becoming a celebrity, and he would be their ticket to greatness also. But while the disciples were anticipating long powerful lives ahead, Jesus was seeing the end of his life coming soon. While the disciples were fantasizing about adoring crowds, Jesus knew the crowds would soon be mocking him. While the disciples were day dreaming about what they could get, Jesus was thinking about what he could give. The disciples could see their names in lights, Jesus could see his hands stretched out on an executioner's cross.

I don't want to be too hard on the disciples for their behavior. They were only doing what comes naturally. If you believe what modern geneticists and biologists tell us, looking out for yourself is essential to the preservation of the species. Bowser and Fido already know that, and so do we.

But Jesus gets right in the disciples faces and ours too, and he says this kind of behavior is not acceptable. He gives them a chewing out, a little parental instruction that they and us need.

Here's the passage: Jesus says to the disciples, "*Whoever wants to be first must be last of all.*" Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "*Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.*" It was necessary for Jesus to teach his friends and he needs to teach us, because left to our own devices we will be like the disciples every time, focused on ourselves, our importance, our glory, our rewards. We need to be taught otherwise.

And here's what Jesus is teaching us: You are not to live according to your self-centered interests. Instead, if you are going to be followers of Jesus, then you've got to be givers and not takers. Put others first, even little children, who are emblematic of the helpless, the marginalized, the dependent, the powerless. That's what he's teaching us.

There's even hope for Bowser and Fido. They each have a master. And if this master is loving and diligent in teaching them, they can learn better behaviors, even if they still do get out of control at the food bowl. They will even develop a loyalty and love to their master that becomes central to their lives.

Today two children will be baptized right here. We as a church will welcome them in the Name of Jesus. This is more than a ceremony. For Elliott and Jocelyn this is the beginning of a new life. During the liturgy I will ask the parents and Godparents – and this is a hugely serious question: *Will you by your prayers and witness help these children to grow into the full stature of Christ?*

You see we are confessing that these children cannot make it on their own. They are not to be allowed to grow up as they will, left to their own devices, left to their natural tendencies. If that is done, we just propagate the self-centered tendency of the disciples, Bowser and Fido, and all the shameful examples of celebrities that have already been named. No, letting nature take its course will not do. The question I will ask the parents and Godparents is: *Will you by your prayers and witness **help these children** to grow into the full stature of Christ?* Helping these children grow up will require our action, our prayers, and our witness. Jesus loved the disciples too much to leave them to their own devices and we love Elliott and Jocelyn too much to leave them to theirs. We will commit today to give them the help they need in learning how to live. Help to grow into *the full stature of Christ*.

And what does it mean to be in the full stature of Christ? It means to live a life of generosity and sacrifice and faith. Putting others ahead of yourself. Not looking for what you can take from the world, but what you can give. It means that Jocelyn and Elliott will grow up longing to please and obey God. It means they will thirst for justice and truth. They will have hearts that break for anyone who is down and out, anyone who is hurting or poorly treated. It means they will not look the other way when they see a homeless person. It means that when they hear of hatred, or violence, or neglect, or rejection, or unfairness they will be driven to do something about it. It means they may or may not ever sunbathe on the French Riviera or win an Oscar or be a CEO. But it does mean that they will experience joy and peace and love and that their lives will be pleasing to God. And they will know the closeness of their Lord Jesus. That is true greatness. It's the greatness given to Elliott and Jocelyn this morning, and it's the greatness offered to all of us as well, if we will allow our Lord to teach us how to live. Amen.