

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
The Voice – Our Choice: Will You Join the Co-op?
Rev. Dr. John Judson
January 18, 2015

Genesis 2:15-25, Mark 1:14-20

It was the job she liked least among all of the jobs that she has had. My daughter Katie who is now 27 has had, like many of us, a wide spectrum of jobs. She has worked in a book store. She has stood on street corners raising funds for a variety of causes, she has been a Peace Corps Volunteer and there have been others. But the one she liked the least was being wait-staff at a TGI Fridays. What she liked least about it was not the hours, she had worked longer. It was not the working conditions, she had worse. It was not the fact that people walked the check and she had to cough up the money out of her pay, it was the fact that she was often treated like someone's personal servant to be criticized and abused. Katie would approach every table with a smile and a friendly, positive and helpful attitude. On a regular basis what she received in return was condescension and criticism...even when everything on the order she brought was correct. It was as if, from my parental perspective, she was seen as staff to be ordered about by her superiors.

We might think that this is an exception rather than the rule in restaurants, but studies have shown that huge numbers of dedicated wait-staff are treated in similar fashion. But all in all this should not surprise us. It should not surprise us because the world has always been divided between master and servant, superiors and inferiors and those who expect to be waited up and those who wait upon them. In fact this book (the Bible) is filled with almost unending examples. Abraham, the great patriarch had servants and slaves. Joseph, the guy with the multi-colored coat, was sold into slavery in Egypt, from which God later freed his descendants. Those people made slaves and servants of the people they conquered. Paul even writes one of his letters to a slave owner named Philemon discussing his treatment of a slave...without mentioning the possibility of Philemon letting his slave go free. No, the image of servant and master was one firmly entrenched in scripture.

What is even more interesting for me however, is how the church has used the scriptures not only to defend institutions such as slavery, but that they used whatever passages they could to make sure that certain people were seen as superior and to be served and others were seen as inferior and were to do the serving. Our Genesis story is one of the go-to texts used for this purpose. This story is the second account of how we ended up with both male and female. The other account in Genesis 1, has them being created in the same moment. In this story, God realizes that it is not good for Adam to be alone, meaning human beings were created for community and not isolation. God creates all sorts of animals...most without opposable thumbs, and they don't fit the bill. Finally God takes one of Adam's ribs and fashions woman as a helpmate. The direction much of ancient Judaism and Christianity took with this story, and the word for helper, was that Eve was the helper, the staff to Adam. One serving and the other being served.

The gift that we have been given as Presbyterians living in the 21st Century is that Biblical scholars did some good work not only with this text but with other texts that appeared to create superior and inferior groups within society and within the church. What they discovered was that the scriptures

point not in that direction but in the direction of mutuality, of partnership between all persons regardless of gender, race, ability or sexual orientation. And by the way, our Genesis text was one of the go-to texts for this point of view. This is so because the word for “helper” or “helpmate” in the Hebrew was focused on someone being a partner in a larger endeavor than a servant to the other. In other words Eve was intended, as another human being, to partner with Adam in the work of caring for creation. The intimacy of this partnership was expressed in the fact that Eve was “bone of Adam’s bone, and flesh of his flesh.” And just to be clear, this intimate relationship is supposed to be at the heart of every human relationship and not just that of men and women. It is a human thing. Thus the Presbyterian Church has strived to insure that there is equality in membership and leadership irrespective of any worldly condition. And so it would seem that we have moved beyond the practice of those who serve and those who are to be served. Except in one almost unnoticed way we have not...and that is between paid church workers and the members who pay them.

I realize that the statement I just made is a loaded one. So let me unpack it. One of the great realizations of the Reformation and the early years of the Presbyterian Church was this realization that there was partnership, and parity between clergy and laity. The only difference was that clergy were seminary trained and the laity were not. The task of the clergy then was to train church members to become theologians and Biblical scholars in their own right. In the 19th Century it was said that if you scratch a Presbyterian you find a theologian. The task of laity then was to become partners with clergy such that laity became ministers in their homes, their places of business and in the larger community. Laity were to be ministers where the minister might not be able to go. But a funny thing happened on the way to the 20th Century. This partnership began to unravel as ministers and other church workers began to be seen as professionals. At the turn of the last century there was a rise in the differentiation of work between amateurs or generalists and professionals. With the rise of professionals, people began to rely more and more on them for leadership, advice and expertise. People in essence seceded over to them large portions of what they used to do.

The church was not immune to this. Clergy became the professional religious people. Christian Educators became the professional religious teachers. Music directors became...well you get my point. And so the concept of partnership, true partnership between paid staff and church members began to vanish...and there came to be a differentiation between membership and staff. And the larger the church, the greater the differentiation became. The problem with this is twofold. First it is not Biblical. As I said a moment ago, the Biblical model of community is that there is true partnership in which everyone shares fully in the life and work of God’s kingdom bringing community. We see this in Jesus’ calling and training of the disciples. Jesus wanted them to be full partners with him in his work and he commanded them to train all others to be the same. The second is that it robs you, the membership, of the opportunity to discover and use the spiritual gifts that you have been given. In fact it almost implies that whatever gifts you have are not quite as good as the gifts given to the religious pros. And by not letting you discover and use your gifts, the church itself is diminished. So how do we change this? How do we once again become a place where there is true partnership between laity and clergy?

The answer I believe is by using a new image, or a new lens, through which we see ourselves...and that image is that we are a Christian Co-op. My daughter Katie, is part of a bicycle co-op in Oakland,

California, called Spokeland. Interestingly enough there are many similarities between Spokeland and a church. First they are centered around their passion for cycling. We are centered around our passion for Jesus Christ. They are governed by a group of core members. We are governed by our session...which is composed of core members. You become a member of Spokeland by giving money or volunteer time. Same with us. They have programs about cycling and we have programs about faithful living. But there is one way in which we are different. At Spokeland no one does anything for you. It is a DIY/DIT community. In other words it is a Do It Yourself or a Do It Together community. It is not a bike shop where a professional fixes bikes. If your bike needs work you can either use the tools present to do it yourself or one of the volunteer/members will teach you how to fix it. In this way every member grows in their knowledge of and connection to cycling.

What would happen then if we saw ourselves as being part of this kind of a co-op? What if we saw ourselves as a community in which the paid staff taught skills to members, who then shared those skills with others, and this continued to repeat itself? What if we saw ourselves as a place where there were no professional staff, but paid partners in this creative endeavor? What would happen? I believe what would happen is that it would allow each of us to use our gifts and talents to the fullest and would make First Presbyterian a truly amazing Christ centered co-op.

My challenge to you then for this week is to ask yourselves, how am I being a partner in this Christ centered co-op such that I fully develop my gifts and then share them with others?