

October 21, 2018
22nd Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 24, Year B, RCL
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Job 23:1-9, 16-17
Psalm 22:1-15
Hebrews 4:12-16
Mark 10:17-31

There are *at least* three special things happening today at St. Thomas's: first, we have welcomed among us the Rev. Deacon April Alford-Harkey; second, we will baptize baby Chloe Grace Milano; third, we are kicking off our annual stewardship campaign.

Those three things are more closely connected than it might appear at first glance. To illuminate those connections, let's cast upon them the light of the Gospel.

In today's story, James and John reveal their desire to rise to the top of the discipleship heap. In the world they occupy, their question is reasonable. In the new world being birthed by Jesus, their question is nonsensical.

For weeks, Mark has been sounding pretty repetitive. Today, AGAIN, the disciples get it wrong. Today, AGAIN, Jesus tells them things are changing.

If Mark is repetitive, the reason seems pretty clear: the disciples aren't getting it. That's understandable. The disciples have lifetimes of learning—consciously and subconsciously—what “success” looks like and how it is achieved. Therefore they hold deeply embedded expectations about the workings of the world and their operation in it; they also hold deeply embedded expectations about this life and its relationship to the next one. Jesus is upending everything they learned about “success.” What Jesus describes is so far from their expectations as to be barely imaginable. Moreover, at this point, their expectations are holding them back.

The phrase that keeps popping up in my mind is this: “The jig is up.” The jig is up. One website described that phrase, as “used to say that a dishonest plan or activity has been discovered and will not be allowed to continue.”¹

The jig is up. You might say that the old world order is a trick from which the tricksters are benefitting. Jesus has revealed the truth: the game is loaded, and even the winners aren't really winning. The jig is up, the trick has been revealed, and the disciples have to learn a whole new game. Jesus says it over and over; apparently it is so difficult to comprehend that he has to drive the point home, even for those who are closest to him.

In today's reading, Jesus says it this way: greatness isn't about being lord or tyrant; greatness is about being servant.

It's a nice coincidence that the words *serve* and *servant* turned up in today's reading. Throughout the New Testament, the English words *serve* and *servant* are used to translate words stemming from the Greek root *diakonos*. *Diakonos* is also the Greek word from which we get our English word *deacon*.

Today Deacon April joins all of us as a colleague in ministry. I suppose that many of you have never been in a church with a deacon. Like the Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions, but unlike other Protestant traditions, Anglicanism has retained the ancient practice of three orders of ordained ministry: bishops, priests, and deacons. In the Episcopal Church, for reasons that I won't delve into here, there aren't enough deacons to go around, not nearly enough. Bishop Laura, who assigns deacons to their posts, must have figured that St. Thomas's is now positioned to capitalize on this opportunity.

Over time, April herself will tell us about how she understands and embodies diaconal ministry. But today, on her first Sunday here, it seems appropriate for me to talk a little about that.

The Catechism of our *Book of Common Prayer*, says this:

Q. What is the ministry of a deacon?

A. The ministry of a deacon is to represent Christ and his Church, particularly as a servant of those in need; and to assist bishops and priests in the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments.²

Jesus calls all Christian disciples to a life of service, and for that the deacon is our leader and our exemplar. The deacon brings the concerns of the world into the church; the deacon sends the church into the world in service to others.

During worship, you will see and hear April assuming some liturgical functions that the priest had been doing. April has proclaimed the Gospel; she will set the altar and do the dismissal. When the confession returns next week, she will bid it. The thread running through these things is the deacon's particular call to *servant* ministry.

In my own parish ministry, I've almost always worked with a deacon—that was true when I was brand-new Episcopalian, when I became a lay leader working on social justice issues, when I then became a newly ordained priest, and then over time, as I was a more experienced priest adjusting to a changing church and social landscape. Each of the deacons with whom I worked was instrumental in my own formation in discipleship; each of them changed me and my perspective.

There is *a lot* I could say about that, but for now I'll share one short story. It's from about ten years ago. It was only a moment, really, but a moment that has remained with me ever since. One of my deacon mentors was celebrating the anniversary of her ordination. It was then about the twentieth anniversary of her ordination. During our church staff meeting, while we were offering prayers, she thanked God for giving her the *gift* of a call to servant ministry. She thanked God for giving her the *gift* of a call to servant ministry. How seldom we think of it that way. That deacon's prayer shifted my perception—of *her* call to ministry, and of *my own* call to ministry.

Now for those who hail from historically marginalized populations—for instance, women and people of color—the word “servant” is intrinsically problematic. It can be helpful to remember this: that *humility* and *humiliation* are not the same thing; that *servanthood* and *servitude* are not the same thing. Humility and servanthood actually come from a position of *strength*, not from a position of *oppression*. God does not want us slogging through our lives. I have no doubt about that. Paradoxically, as Jesus taught and my deacon colleague knew, embracing God’s call to servanthood can be a source of the deep joy that is so often elusive in our lives.

In just a few minutes we will baptize Chloe Grace Milano. Remember, in Episcopal Church theology, baptism is the full initiation into the Body of Christ—and in this case, into the particular part of the Body of Christ located here at St. Thomas’s. We will name Chloe Grace as one of God’s own children, entrusted to us for care and nurture, and ultimately empowered for service in Jesus’ name. As Chloe Grace embarks on her new life in Christ, we might reflect on our own.

This brings us to today’s third special event: the kick-off of our annual stewardship season. Your Stewardship Team is hosting a seated luncheon today after church. You will begin receiving information this week. We will observe the season through Sunday, November 18, the day by which we hope you will return your pledge. You will note some special liturgical pieces during this time.

Diana Empsall is leading the Stewardship Team in trying to shift the conversation around stewardship. Therefore it is extra fitting that the theme of this year’s campaign is “See, I am making all things new.” That’s from chapter 21, verse 5, of the Book of Revelation. Jesus *is* making all things new. Jesus is making *St. Thomas’s* new. That makes it a good time to examine our embedded expectations. It’s likely that, while some are propelling us forward, others of them are likely holding us back.

I’m nearing the three-year mark at St. Thomas’s. In many respects, we have come such a long way. In others, we are just getting started. I arrived here with a conviction I still hold: St. Thomas’s is uniquely situated to flourish in the years ahead. It’s true. That’s due to the ways St. Thomas’s is completely unique in Connecticut, among Episcopal churches and even among all Protestant churches. Some are very important concrete factors: our location in this vibrant neighborhood, our demographics—just look around—and our Day School. Others very important immeasurables: our liturgy and especially our music, our leadership on LGBT+ justice, our valuing of education writ large.

“See, I am making all things new.”

Or, the jig is up.

And thank God for that.

God has called us, all of us, to this place at this time, in service to the Gospel, in service to a world that is being made new. Individually and collectively, God has blessed us with abundant gifts. We return to God from that abundance, with joy, in faith and hope and love.

Notes

¹ “the jig is up,” Merriam-Webster, available online at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/the%20jig%20is%20up> (accessed October 19, 2018).

² *The 1979 Book of Common Prayer*, 856.