

[2 Kings 5:1-14](#)

[Psalm 30](#)

[Galatians 6:\(1-6\), 7-16](#)

[Luke 10:1-11, 16-20](#)

Sermon by the Rector

Sunday, July 4, 2010

Flattery ranks high in the hierarchy of sins Christian teaching has elaborated. Dante has a circle for flatterers in the Inferno, and another circle where flatterers can purify themselves of their besetting sin.

Paul engages the sin of flattery in his letter to the Galatians, in a passage that comes before what we heard earlier. “It is good to be made much of,” he tells the Galatians, “but to a good purpose.”

A group of apostles who wish to displace Paul and his teaching have come to Galatia. They preach a “different gospel”. Paul’s preaching emphasizes the free gift of reconciliation, received through faith. These rival apostles stress rules, regulations and ritual, focusing on the centrality of circumcision for entering the Christian community – anathema to Paul’s message.

They use flattery to win the hearts of the Galatians. The “make much of them”, but to no good purpose. As soon as they’ve signed up the Galatians as members of their clique, they’ll move on to the next city, leaving the Galatians feeling betrayed and bereft. Events that transpire in New Hampshire every four years might help us to understand the Galatians’ situation. Presidential candidates and their entourages descend on the state, assuring its citizens that their support is vital to their campaigns and to the well-being of the republic. Early on primary day, though, they’re gone, on to South Carolina to flatter a new group of voters. The people of New Hampshire are probably immune to feelings of betrayal by now, but the Galatians probably weren’t.

None of this is alien to us. We make much of those whose support or help we need, and we like to be made much of. We make much of ourselves, sometimes, though we try to keep it a secret, even to hide it from our own inward eye. Occasionally we catch ourselves feeling, or even acting, like the Syrian general Naaman (the reading says he’s from Aram: “Aram” and “Syria”, like “Aramean” and “Syrian”, are synonyms in the Bible). Naaman is an important man, a successful general, with leprosy. Elisha, a holy man and a healer, seems not to acknowledge Naaman’s importance. He does not come out of his tent to greet Naaman personally. He makes no fuss over him. Naaman is offended. Doesn’t Elisha know that he should be “making much of” Naaman? He leaves in a huff, determined not to follow the instructions Elisha has conveyed to him through an assistant, until his underlings convince him to think again, and to wash himself in the Jordan’s waters.

In today's gospel, Jesus is worried that his apostles will become like Naaman. Not at first, of course. At first, he focuses on their fear. He is sending them forth to preach, to teach and to heal. He won't be with them, to absorb or buffer rejection. He gives them solid, practical counsel about how to respond to it: let your peace return to you; shake the dust off your feet – let it go and move on, in modern parlance.

But Jesus knows that many will receive the apostles with joy, and experience healing through their gifts. He knows that, soon, people will begin to make much of them, even to use flattery for the purposes of manipulation, and that the apostles will begin to expect this sort of treatment. So, when they return and recount their successes, he counsels them not to rejoice in the power they've exercised and the accolades this has brought them, but in God's abiding love for them: "Your names are written in heaven."

It's Independence Day, when we celebrate the founding of a nation that likes to be made much of. This proclivity, to flatter ourselves and to seek flattery, finds expression in some of the noblest undertakings in our history, and it's insinuated itself into every part of our lives, private and personal as well as public. Here are three examples.

First: in common with other Western nations, we've come to stress the importance of self-esteem in recent decades, in the raising of children and elsewhere. Thank goodness. I remember my scoutmaster, Max Gerwig, a cherished father-figure in my adolescence. He was as tough as they come, unyielding on the matter of crossing every "t" and dotting every "i" in order to attain various ranks and merit badges. But he always knew – as many other men of Troop 290 did not – just where to draw the line that separates toughness from insult and cruelty, and never crossed it. All his interactions with me ended with me feeling better about myself.

We're not all as wise as Max Gerwig, though, and for all its beneficent effects our focus on buttressing self-esteem has created some unintended and toxic consequences. We know people who have to be "made much of" just to do their duty, to carry out their fundamental obligations as family members, church members, citizens. And, if we're honest, we'll admit that there's a little piece of this seeker of flattery in each of us, expecting that our self-esteem should be fortified by every good and decent thing we do.

Second: our nation began by the unprecedented act of enumerating God-given rights, inherent in the human person, subject neither to being granted nor taken away by any government. Some of the history of which we are justly proud has occurred when we secured the enjoyment of these rights for groups to which full enjoyment had been denied. The Civil Rights movement comes to mind, as does the movement for full inclusion of gay and lesbian persons in our national and local communities. The need to remedy past injustices has compelled us to create protected classes of people, on whose behalf we exercise special vigilance. All of this is necessary, good and even noble.

Still, our focus on rights has made us a little prickly, don't you think? Whether we're a member of a protected class, or a little resentful that we're not, we're hyper-aware of slights to our dignity, intrusions on our rights and liberties. It's the other side of our need

to be flattered: we start to see violations and insults in the ordinary buffetings, the rough-and-tumble, of life with other human beings. We identify this readily in the public realm, but a sharp and unwavering eye might detect it in the recesses of our hearts, too.

Finally, there's our exaltation of enterprise and achievement. It accounts for so much of what is best about our nation: our prosperity and resilience, the opportunities people come from beyond our borders to seek, our influence in the community of nations. But, without doubt, we've come to believe that enterprise and achievement confer entitlement, in the form of an exemption from the requirement that we all play by the same rules. I hardly need to adduce examples of this to make my point. The sad revelations about General McChrystal and his inner circle only bring the latest confirmation of this toxic trend.

\*\*\*\*\*

Flattery is fickle. We seek to establish a place for ourselves in the world when we make much of ourselves, or look to others to make much of us. But this place, carefully constructed, crumbles at the touch of disappointment. And disappointment comes: we let ourselves down, we let down those who have expected great things from us. The writer of psalm 30 may have been reflecting on the experience of having disappointed himself, or herself, or others, in these affecting lines that we spoke just a few minutes ago:

“When I felt secure, I said, ‘I shall never be disturbed.  
You, Lord, with your favor, made me as strong as the mountains.’

“Then you hid your face,  
and I was filled with fear.”

Jesus may have held these lines in his heart as he watched his apostles go forth. And so, when they returned, he told them of a place not constructed or defended by flattery, by making much of ourselves, or being made much of. A name written in heaven, a purpose and mission that we can't discern at every moment, but which abides in and through even bitter disappointment. Perhaps Jesus, looking down on our nation on this festive day, knows that we feel, even if we don't acknowledge feeling, like we've let ourselves and others down. Partly by our own fault, our vaunted powers aren't quite what they used to be. Other nations occasionally step into gaps we used to fill. Economic recovery, especially full employment, are unsettlingly elusive.

Jesus might tell us, in this moment, not to give ourselves over either to empty boasting, or to fear and pessimism. Our names, as individuals and as a nation, are still written in heaven. That place built by being made much of, once so secure, is disappearing. But God still makes much of us – not because we have not disappointed God, but in despite of the fact that we have. We rejoice in our heritage, of optimistic self-esteem, of inalienable rights, of enterprise and achievement. We know we've fallen short of the expectations bequeathed to us, and feel a secret shame at having made so much of

ourselves. But God has not finished with us yet. God is teaching us to conduct ourselves with confidence while resisting arrogance, to defend our rights but not invoke them as an excuse or a crutch, to embrace enterprise and achievement, but understand that these things call forth gratitude, not a sense of entitlement. As the Prayer Book Collect for our Country so eloquently puts it: “In the time of prosperity, fill our hearts with thankfulness, and in the day of trouble, suffer not our trust in thee to fail.”