

Sermon Preached on October 17, 2021 – Fifth Sunday of Creation

By The Rev. Anne C. Fowler

St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church, Yarmouth, ME 04096

Genesis 1:24-31

Psalm 8

Mark 10:35-45

“But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.” ~ Mark 10:34

As the disciples would say, this is a hard saying, a hard saying indeed. After all, we are hardwired for competition, for fighting for our lives and our livelihoods. We are programmed to live in a world of scarcity and to struggle for our share of what we need to survive. If we have not evolved beyond these instincts in our first world of abundance, imagine how it was for the peasant class who were Jesus' disciples and his audience. How could they not wish to be first? To get ahead so that they might thrive in a hard, hard world?

But what the disciples want is not of this world but the next. They want to be assured of their place in heaven beside Jesus in his glory. They want to be promised their salvation. But as Jesus points out, that promise is not his to give. It's God's alone. And given all that Jesus has taught up until this moment, we may suspect that God will not look too kindly on spiritual competitiveness.

Last week I told you that I'd made a trip to Boston. Part of my mission was to visit my troubled friends. The other part was to get together for a filming session with a group of women I've been meeting with since 1994. Some of you will remember that in 1994 in Boston, John Salvi killed two staff women at two Planned Parenthood clinics. In the aftermath of that terrible act, then-Governor Weld and then-Cardinal Law called for a lessening of the heated rhetoric in the public abortion debates. This caught the attention of a non-profit called the Public Conversations Project, who organized and facilitated dialogues on difficult and divisive topics. And they were focusing on abortion. I'd been doing pro-choice advocacy and participating in such dialogues in the Diocese of Massachusetts, and the Public Conversations people tracked me down and invited me to participate in couple of their dialogues.

So after the Salvi shootings they tracked me down again. They interviewed about 20 pro-choice and pro-life leaders in the Boston area and invited six of us to join a dialogue. We committed to 4 meetings. That was 18 years ago. We stopped meeting regularly after about 6 or 8 years, I reckon, but things kept coming up to compel us back together. Most recently it has been a crew making a documentary film about us.

The Public Conversations Project has been one of the most difficult and most rewarding experiences of my life. Early on I realized that it was the closest I'd ever come to understanding the early Church. We met in the basement of a windowless room, we pledged ourselves to secrecy, we broke bread together and we struggled with our disagreements. What kept us together? In the early Church Jews and Gentiles were contained within the liturgy. We were contained by thoughtful and firm facilitation. One of the facilitators was the visionary who'd founded the Conversations; the other was a mediator who'd worked with Israel Jews and Arabs, with the cleaning up of a superfund site, and in other highly fraught situations. And now us.

The three pro-life women are all Vatican Catholics. They revere the former Cardinal Law, whom I believe should be in jail rather than in Rome, they visit him in his cushy retirement and bring back his best wishes to all of us. Which we pro-choicers graciously receive. At the time of the dialogues we pro-choicers were the CEO

of Planned Parenthood of Massachusetts, the CEO of NARAL pro-choice Massachusetts, and me an Episcopal priest and go-to person for abortion related issues in the Diocese of Massachusetts.

I could fill a season of sermons with tales of our times together. I will tell you that we learned to laugh together, we consoled each other during crises in each other, we came to trust each other and to have each other's backs. We talked about loving each other but I'm a little tentative about that. I am certainly very fond of everybody. The question of respect remains moot. Can you respect folks if you don't respect their positions? We respect their right to be pro-life but they don't respect ours to be pro-choice. The jury is out on respect. I will also tell you that nobody's position on the question of abortion – the only question for us – nobody's positions changed in the least. We only became more solid because we had to examine and defend our beliefs with those with whom we strongly disagreed.

I will also tell you about the most painful encounter I've had in the 18 years. I always felt that I was judged most severely by the pro-lifers because I am a priest. Did they even believe in my orders? I never asked them that for fear that all civility would break down. But whatever, they could not believe someone who claimed to be a religious leader could also be pro-choice.

One day I asked the pro-lifers if they thought I was a moral person. They couldn't answer. They talked boiler-plate about its not being their place to judge anyone. But as they say, a non-answer is an answer. I've pressed the point several times and I always get the same equivocation. So I believe that in their hearts these pious ladies believe they are holier than I. Like James and John, they want to sit at God's right and left hands, and they don't think I belong in the heavenly room at all. And that's okay, because I'm not sure I believe in their kind of heaven. I don't want to compete for a place there in any event. Still, it's very painful to be thought immoral. I value my integrity above all else, and it hurts to have spent such an extraordinary amount of time with folks who question it or deny it.

But I will also say this: I think Jesus was trying to teach that eternal life is in the here and now, if only we choose to live profoundly. And if so, the opportunity to spend several hundred hours talking with folks, talking deeply and exclusively, about the very issue we disagree on – that has been one of the great privileges of my life. That experience has transformed me, it has transformed all of us. And if only, if only, we could find a way for it to transform the world!

Alleluia! Amen.