

**The Sixth Sunday After Epiphany**  
**February 11, 2007**  
**St. Gabriel's Episcopal Church, Eastpointe, Michigan**

I turned 50 last January – that's January 2006 – and I hoped, and imagined, that that first year of the second half of my life would be full of surprises. Good surprises that would make clear to me what God put me here on earth for; that would show me and teach me things I hadn't yet learned during my initial half-century of life.

2006 brought two "firsts." I got my first speeding ticket driving my daughter back to college in Indiana. I chose to look at that as reflecting my new willingness to take a few risks, to live a little dangerously – off the road more than on it, of course.

The second "first" came in August, when I got fired from a job for the very first time, and I joined the swelling ranks of Michigan's unemployed. Surprise! ... but not exactly the kind I had in mind. What's that saying: "We make plans and God laughs"?

My story is not unique. Plenty of people have lost their jobs – whether we saw it coming or not, whether we lost it for cause or no cause at all, whether it was handled well or terribly – it is not fun. In all of about 15 minutes, I lost some tangibles – my salary, benefits, paid vacation and holidays. But I also lost intangibles I never even registered that I had. The right to be treated with dignity and respect. To be looked in the eye and listened to. I lost the status, the privilege and even the power that went along with the job – who knew I even had such things. I became, in that 15 minutes, a "nobody" in a work world of "somebodies."

In his book, *Somebodies and Nobodies: Overcoming the Abuse of Rank*, Robert Fuller describes a new kind of discrimination he calls "rankism." Unlike many of the other "isms" – racism, sexism, classism – we all have experienced rankism at some point in our lives. It's when we are put down, or put down others, based on our place, our status – our rank – within the hierarchies in which we live, work, vote, play, and yes, even worship. The lower your rank, Fuller says, the more you are marked for disregard and even abuse. The lower your rank, the more weak, vulnerable, and powerless you are seen as. The more invisible.

Let's face it: People don't often want to align themselves with low-ranking people; they want to rub shoulders with the rich and famous, the politicians, the boss – those in authority roles. That's where the prestige and the power is. We tend to treat those people with automatic respect, even when they don't earn it or deserve it. Many of us will put up with being poorly treated by these people, because we think we have to. They have power over us and over our livelihoods. The worst part? Sometimes we start to believe they actually are better than we are.

Yet the waitress who pours us another cup of coffee, or the clerk who rings up our groceries, or the housekeeping staff who clean our hotel room when we are on vacation, get maybe a tip – never mind generous, maybe a curt thank-you, but more

likely hardly a glance that acknowledges their humanity. Worst part number two? Sometimes we start to believe we actually are better than they are. Rankism creates a pecking order, and that's the horror of it.

My friend Barbara tells me that when her boss gets mad at her because she has made a mistake, or he thinks she has, he calls her – and I am quoting here – a “stupid idiot.” She puts up with it, because she feels she has to. It's a job and she needs the money. She doesn't have a choice. She says she's learned to ignore it, tells herself he doesn't mean it, even laughs it off. She says it doesn't bother her anymore.

But I think such disrespectful, mean behavior is the gift that keeps on giving. It breeds a kind of kick-the-dog syndrome that we unwittingly pass along to others. The wage earner comes home from a day of mistreatment at the hand of his or her boss, and kicks the family pet or screams at a spouse or children. It leads to road rage. It leads to people going postal. It leads to drug and alcohol abuse, to depression, even to suicide.

This statement by author Carolyn Heilbrun is not only my favorite quote these days, it is part of my personal mission as a writer and storyteller. “Power consists to a large extent in deciding what stories will be told.”

Power consists to a large extent in deciding what – and whose – stories will be told.

That means the person with the real power is the one who can have his or her version of the truth told. By abusing this power, he will always be right, and those who would contradict him will be wrong, because they are silenced and “disappeared” like the dissidents in Central America, those who dare to speak out against misuse of power. Perhaps that sounds melodramatic – but that is exactly how it feels.

This quote speaks to me, because what I have learned most from my experiences being unemployed, cash poor, frightened, and pretty desperate, is that the most damaging – by far – is being made invisible and insignificant. We all have something to say, we all have experiences that are meaningful to us and meaningful to others that we want to share. Recognition – the yearning to be seen and heard – this is a human need that begins when we are babies and never goes away. We are social animals. Being ignored, treated like you don't count, like you don't exist – being discarded and disregarded – this is a very difficult and destructive thing. And it is all part of the insidiousness of rankism, of keeping those on top, on top, and those below in their place.

Today's reading from Luke is a challenge. If you are rich, is Jesus telling you “no matter who you are, go ahead and eat, drink and be merry because that's all you are getting for eternity”? What about good rich people? Is he saying there aren't any?

And if you are poor, is Jesus saying “I know life really stinks for you now, but put up with it because it'll get better after you're dead”? This passage has been used –

including by the Church throughout history – to quell uprisings, pacify the masses, and justify injustice. That has always been troubling to me.

It seems to me that this passage from Luke is instead an indictment of our tendency toward rankism and entitlement, of our willingness to establish and follow a pecking order in our society, where some think they are better than others and deserve more and better – while others feel that they are “less than” and deserve less or nothing, and they’d better appreciate what little they get.

There are good and evil rich people, as there are good and evil poor people. We are the same. We are people. I don’t think Jesus was saying it’s the wealth or status that makes someone a more decent person, any more than the lack of it makes someone more or less decent. What makes a person a decent, deserving, worthy person is how well they treat others, how they respect and protect the dignity of every human being, without regard to rank. That’s what will get us into heaven.

But just how do we come to such a place of empathy and understanding for others when the world around us is filled with abuse and those willing to abuse us? Just look at how we entertain ourselves: “American Idol” remains high in television ratings, and Simon has reached an all-time low in how he abuses performers hoping to realize their dreams. He criticizes and ridicules not only their singing but now their weight, their stature, their physical appearance and their mental limitations.

How do we as faithful people rise above this and stand with those who find themselves – often just by the luck of the draw – with the lowest rank? As they say, there but for the grace of God go I.

I think it is as simple as random acts of kindness. Even Ebenezer Scrooge’s cold heart ultimately was turned as he witnessed and experienced the kindness of others. Look those you meet in the eye, without averting your gaze. They are human and here and they matter. We all matter.

Be nice. By that I mean use good manners and treat everyone with common courtesy. There is a small but meaty book called *The Power of Nice*. I recommend it. It doesn’t advocate the phony, saccharine kind of nice that flatters and manipulates. And it doesn’t mean be a doormat and let others take advantage. It means be genuine-nice, caring-for-another-pilgrim-traveling-this-life nice. The road can be long and a little hospitality is a helpful thing.

It is simple, and incredibly difficult, to truly love our neighbor as ourselves, and to treat others as we would want to be treated – and would want our family members and friends to be treated. But generations of children have been raised by generations of mothers on this advice. Somehow in the world today we have forgotten it.

Tragedy is a great leveler, because it reminds us how vulnerable all of us are, how we truly are all the same, and how little rank means when it comes right down to it. The

strongest memory I have of September 11, 2001, is this. I was working a few evenings a week then in a day-planner store. Retail employees have their share of nightmare customers, along with the pleasant ones, but generally speaking, our interactions were quick, surface and to the point. We didn't spend a lot of time in conversation with customers, who wanted to make their purchase quickly and be on their way. But the week after 9-11, and even into the second week, the pace at the store slowed tremendously. No one was in a hurry. I remember customers asking, "How are you?" and meaning it, waiting for a response. We asked each other: what were you doing on September 11, how are you holding up, how are your children doing with it all? Everyone was gentle and kind with one another.

I am not imagining this. I remember at the time being shocked by it. When driving, people actually stopped and with a wave yielded to the car pulling out of the driveway. People didn't speed up on the freeway to prevent another car from merging in front of them. You know this just isn't typical of metropolitan Detroit driving. Traffic was slower, and drivers really were more patient, polite and thoughtful. It didn't last long; soon enough people were back to their old ways. But to me it was a taste of the Kingdom of God, and we were all building it together. We were all going to be blessed if we could keep this up. It didn't matter who was rich or poor; neither wealth, nor social status, nor job title were indicators of our humanity. We were all somebodies, because we are somebodies in God's eyes.

When you leave church today, I encourage you to give it a try. Turn the status ladder on its side. Don't look down on anyone – or up to anyone. Look straight into their face, eye to eye, one "somebody" to another "somebody." Smile. Be polite. Be gracious. Be caring. Be nice. Thank the cashier. Give the waitress the tip she earned – or even if she didn't. If you are a boss, respect the dignity of your employees. Speak out on someone's behalf. If you are an employee, do the same for your boss. Listen to someone's story and let them know they matter. Because we all do.

Each and every one of us matters.

Amen.

Karen D. Bota