

The idea of *subservience* gets a bad rap in these post-modern days. I Googled the term in the context of Christianity or religiosity, and I found links to feminist literature criticizing the tradition of female subservience, or the use of doctrine to keep marginalized folks “in their place.” And one site propounded that subservience to God’s will was bound to pay off in big bucks. A link to an online dictionary provided these “synonyms”: *docile, fawning, slavish, ignoble, obeisant, resigned* and *under one’s thumb*. Sure don’t seem like the American way to me, or to Donald Trump for that matter, who bows his head to no force, except perhaps his own overpowering narcissism.

But this week’s lectionary is loaded with the idea of surrendering oneself to a greater force. As the Psalm tells us: better to “be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked.” The scripture from Romans talks at length about surrendering to Christ to shake our sins. It talks about taking on the God-given right to righteousness. Baptism itself is a ritual of *subservience* as well as *rebirth*. I’m more used to the admonishment to “be yourself,” to “stand up and be counted,” to focus on ones own dreams and strengths (and maybe those of the folks that you love, if they are lucky.)

But the more I think about it, the more this world *needs* people bowing down to the idea of doing right by the world.

Let’s start with a myopic example. I was trained to use the lectionary as a guide to a sermon. That is *subservience*. I’m being *obeisant* to what the scholars of the scriptures put together. I’d *rather* go somewhere else. I’d rather talk to you about the worship of God’s world I enjoyed on the seven days I planted my butt on a bike and road the most pleasant RAGBRAI of my life with Patti Campidelli and our bike team. These folks make up a comradery that are much more enjoyable than any family gathering I’ve ever experienced, and, excluding Mary’s folks, a whole lot smarter than the family that reared me. I’d rather tell you *how* the pie slices and sweet corn I gobbled reminded me constantly of God’s richness; they do, especially if I take the time to lick my fingers—and slowly. But I’m not going to go there—at least not any more than I’ve already done.

Instead, I want to talk about being subservient to God's will, which to me is the active nurturing of human lives and this planet, to dig down into the black soil of this planet, literally and metaphorically, to help unleash the fecundity of our planet and our lives.

Part of that means being a steward. That can be as simple as leaving the AC off when it's under 80 degrees or so, it means actually *using* the food we buy, as well as making sure that we can feed *all* our brethren. It means leaving the planet a better place than we found it, and doing everything in our power to get public servants into power who share that allegiance to serving God's planet and Her folks, including the "folks" who walk on four legs, fly, swim, crawl, skitter and beg us without words to cherish this planet.

Let's pause and think about that term *public servant* for a second. We have had two Democrat Presidents, recently, Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, one who failed and one who succeeded, in passing a public health law that has put us more in line with other developed countries. They risked their popularity, power and pomp to create a nation that would make human health a right, not a lottery choice. Clinton failed, and the power he lost in pushing that agenda reduced his influence in other areas throughout his two terms. Obama succeeded after a sort, but the enemies he made again limited his influence in other arenas and led to a Republican majority in Congress his second term. Indeed, the backlash may have lost the "other" Clinton the election. After Obamacare got pushed through Congress on Christmas eve of 2009, Democrats lost 63 House seats, 10 Senate seats and 12 governorships in 2012.

Bill Clinton and Barack Obama are men with considerable egos and great political savvy. They would have had a much smoother time of their time in office had they dropped the issue. One could argue that Hilary would be in the White house if Obama had not been subservient to the Judaic-Christian cornerstone that all people deserve God's richness—health being central to that richness.

And *subservience* means doing the *grunt* work, getting down and doing what needs to be done no matter who's watching or not, who's *helping* or not. Perhaps the most common and amazing folks who are subservient to a *Higher Will* are parents—and particularly mothers. In recent times we've tried to "heroize" these women in the western culture. A hundred or so years ago we claimed a holiday for them, Mothers Day, a "Hallmark Holiday" as my older daughter terms it. More recently, popular media has made a hero out of the soccer mom who spends every free minute enriching the lives of her children. That's all well and good, but it tends to gloss over the nitty gritty. For those golden *moments* when a mom watches her child graduate or marry or achieve some other goal, there are *hours* of grinding away at the essential minutiae of life: getting food on the table, comforting a playground-damaged child, organizing transportation to here and there, and, hardly the least, waiting up at night while the child is exploring the wonders and perils of adolescence.

Those of you who were here last week heard me talk about my visit to the Sikh temple in Johnston, Iowa. Mary and I attended a gathering sponsored by the Interfaith Alliance. They are organizing monthly "Meet your Religious Neighbor" events. There I observed that Sikhs make subservience and subjugation an *art form*. The grace of their supplication when they approach their alter, a grace my old knees won't let me model, is impressive. Their subjugation to each other and their visitors in gesture and act is *sincere*, the slight bowing, the casting of eyes down for a moment before they search one another's faces—all this lifts them up.

That sounds contradictory, but it's not. Like the mothers I just mentioned, these folks know that giving up of themselves makes themselves more full and more connected. One delightful custom of theirs I observed was their habit of referring to the older males in their flock as "uncles," as in "Bless you, Uncle," or "What is it that you say, Uncle?" I wish I could share this experience with our orange haired uncle in the White House. Can you image how healing it would be to have this country led by a true servant leader?

From their origins in the late fifteenth century, Sikhs rebelled against the caste system commonly practiced by Indian Hindus and also the almost universal “caste system” of placing women below men. They were also practical in their subservience. As one of the uncles tell us, “You can not turn the other cheek forever . . . Otherwise you will go extinct.” Good advice from a people who were persecuted by both Muslims and Hindu and who “therefore” decided to wear their hair and clothes differently from either of those more major populations, the more to stand out and be noticed. This is a population of supplicants who give a disproportionate amount of their money to feeding the hungry, and a disproportionate number of their young men to their adopted countries’ military. There’s a rounded sense of service that most Westerners, indeed, most Christians, would do well to emulate.

A great sadness and madness of recent history was the gunning down of a Sikh man in Washington State and the wounding of another because the White Nationalist who killed them thought their turbans represented them as militant Muslims. The reaction among the Sikhs—continue to take pride in wearing those turbans, in spite of such idiocy. (By the way, the wrapped turban is never worn by Muslims.) The murderer in Washington State was not only an assassin, he was an idiot.

By the way some fun facts about these folks: Sikhs commonly employ two other symbols of their faith. They wear a metal bracelet. This is called a *kara* and it is worn to remind them of the unity of God. The males also carry a *kirpan* which is a ceremonial dagger (though not a weapon) that is meant to remind Sikhs of the duty to fight injustice. Also, all Sikh males share the name: “Singh” which means “lion.” Women carry the name of “Kaur” which means “princess.” This practice started in the early years of the religion, and was a reflection of the Sikh's absolute rejection of the Hindu practice of caste because caste was often identified by ones last name.

You might think I'm being heretical in this sermon, extolling the Sikh tradition and its proud adherence to subservience. Actually there is nothing un-Christian about doing that. It's simply showing the connection, if I need to belabor the obvious. Interestingly, the Sikhs embrace Christians and Muslims and Jews and entreat those folks to join in the Sikh tradition. Theirs is more *a way of thinking* than a theology per se. In fact Mary Jones attended an Episcopal church in Chicago that was regularly attended by Sikhs, the men in full turban and all. And, yes, they did genuflect.

In the words of the African-American activist and children's rights champion Marian Wright Edelman, "Service is the rent we pay for living. It is the very purpose of life, and not something you do in your spare time." Or in the words of the great American bard Glenn Campbell who passed away recently: "Let me be a little kinder, let me be a little blinder
To the faults of those about me. Let me praise a little more.
Let me be when I am weary just a little bit more cheery.
Think a little more of others and a little less of me."

So peace to you all (Sikh gesture) and bring peace to all you encounter. Do *yourself* a favor and your God a *service*, surrender a part of yourself to someone who needs it. And *don't* keep score!

Benediction

So peace *be* with you and *in* you as you surrender part of yourselves to serve your higher power, however you conceive her. As the Sikhs say to each other in greeting or parting: "Sat Sri Akal". This means "God is Truth." And may we be true to God by loving this planet and each other with the fierceness and passion of a mother. So repeat after me, "Sat Sri Akal."

And repeat after me, "God is Truth."

Children's Talk

List the four branches of the military and ask the kids what word we use to describe being a part of the military

Ask the kids what verb we use when we describe what word an elected official does for the people she represents.

The bible readings we have for today talk about service a lot but these use a bigger word: *subservience*. Who do they know who is subservient to their needs.

Does this make that person a lesser person?

Talk about Jesus, the son of God being subservient to his followers and all human kind.