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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29, Mark 9:38-50
Christian Humility, Part 2: Whether Salesmen Too Can Be Saved

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

³⁸John said to him, “Teacher, we saw a man casting out demons in your name, and we forbade him, because he was not following us.” (John 9:38, RSV)

I can see that I am falling behind on sermons. This morning’s Gospel Reading speaks of hell, of the fire that is not quenched and the worm that dieth not. It certainly deserves earnest preaching. And I mean to get to it, but not yet. Later, as we approach Advent, I hope to speak of hell and the last judgment.

This time I want to speak of your competitor -- that one who vies with you, whether in the marketplace, in romance, in the courtroom, on the ball field. Some people win, some people lose. What shall we say about your rival?

My title for this sermon is somewhat strange, somewhat peculiar: “Christian Humility, Part 2: Whether Salesmen Too Can Be Saved.” It is a take-off on the title of a treatise by Martin Luther, which I mean to refer to later. I am aiming to carry forward last Sunday’s discussion of Christian humility. That sermon prompted some fine, thoughtful email questions, including questions about pride in one’s work in a competitive environment. So, that is my topic for today: How can we be humble in a zero-sum game?

What is a “zero-sum game”? In economic theory, a “zero-sum game” is a structure in which the gains of one participant are exactly matched by the losses of other participants. It is a circumstance in which one must “rob Peter to pay Paul.” In the marketplace, it means that if you get the sale, your competitor does not. In sports it means that if the Yankees beat Boston this afternoon, the Yankees advance one game and Boston falls one game farther behind. In romance, it means that if I married Carol, those other men who admired her do not enjoy the blessing of being married to her, which is a deep mystery we will have to leave to heaven. A zero-sum game is a structure of strict competition.

Recall that last Sunday’s rule was that in heaven’s eyes, “we rise by falling.” Jesus answers the Twelve’s question - Who is the greatest? - by pointing to humility and service:

³⁵And he sat down and called the twelve; and he said to them, “If any one would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.” (Mark 9:35, RSV)

In today's Gospel story, here we are, just three verses later, and it seems that already the Twelve have forgotten Christ's rule. They hear about an exorcist casting out demons in the name of Jesus. Do they encourage the man? Do they give thanks for the freeing of the soul the man is able to work? Do they rejoice that someone is adding to their cause by lifting up the precious name of Jesus? Do they - to use the rule of Jesus - count themselves "last of all and servant of all" in relationship to this man? No! Instead of encouraging the man, they forbid him his ministry. They lord it over this man because, as they put it, "he was not following *us*."

Jesus, of course, defends the stranger. He points out that "he that is not against us is for us." (Mark 9:40, RSV) Jesus is consistent with his own rule. He defends the man and raises no complaint that the man uses the name of Jesus but does not follow Jesus and his disciples.

But it is fair to point out that this is not a zero-sum game. The rising up of this stranger does not necessarily mean the falling down of the Twelve. If they had been more large-hearted, they could have rejoiced in the stranger's ministry and turned with renewed commitment to their own ministry in the name of Jesus. They could have lived according to the cheerful saying, "Many hands might light work."

It is the same with today's Old Testament Reading from Numbers Chapter Eleven. Loyal Joshua complains to Moses that Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp. These gentlemen are able to prophesy because, though they had remained in the camp and so were not part of the seventy elders gathered to receive the spirit of Moses, nonetheless they received that spirit anyway. And having the spirit, they did what the Spirit does: they prophesied.

Moses, like Jesus in our Gospel Lesson, defends Eldad and Medad:

²⁸And Joshua the son of Nun, the minister of Moses, one of his chosen men, said, "My lord Moses, forbid them." ²⁹But Moses said to him, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD's people were prophets, that the LORD would put his spirit upon them!"

But again, I think it is fair to note that this is not a zero-sum game. The sharing of the spirit of Moses with the seventy elders and with the two who stayed in the camp did not somehow diminish the spirit of Moses. Moses did not become weaker as those seventy-two became stronger. No, their possession of the spirit simply magnified the good done on earth.

But such is not the case for the salesman. Pity the salesman! Sometimes the salesperson is forced to play a game in which his or her flourishing means failure for the competition. There is only a finite amount of money. If one salesperson gains sales, other salespeople lose sales. Excellence in a sales environment often means defeating the competitor. How, then, do we practice Christian humility in a competitive world? How can we be last and yet take pride in our work and put bread on the table for our families?

As I mentioned earlier, my sermon title is a take-off on a famous treatise by Martin Luther, written in the year 1526: “Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved.” Luther’s fervent answer to that question is, yes, soldiers too can certainly be saved. Luther did not want soldiers to be discouraged about their profession. He admits that stabbing and slaying “do not seem to be works of love,” yet he holds that they can be works of love nonetheless. Luther notes that wars can be unjust and the military office can be abused, yet in many cases, the soldier in good conscience can participate in war’s violence in pursuit of a greater peace and in hope of protecting “wife and child, house and farm, property, and honor and peace.”

I mention this case of the soldier because if ever there were a case of a zero-sum game, the battlefield seems to be it. The flourishing of one soldier can literally mean the death of another. Yet Luther did not necessarily conceive such death as incompatible with Christian love. If this can be true on the battlefield, I should think it could be true too in the marketplace, in the law courts, and in any place where the success of one means the failure of another.

So, let’s ponder the battlefield a bit. First off, I note that if there can be such a thing as Christian humility on the battlefield, it requires that battle not be an excuse for wickedness. John the Baptist taught this to the soldiers who came to him:

¹⁴Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Rob no one by violence or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.” (Luke 3:14, RSV)

In the series of mysteries about the medieval English monk Brother Cadfael, there is a story called *One Corpse Too Many*¹. There has been a battle. Captured soldiers have been executed by order of the king. Cadfael is placed in charge of gathering the bodies of the poor dead soldiers. He prays for them, lays them out, straightens their broken limbs, tries to make them look as good as possible for the sake of their grieving families. He counts them and finds that there are ninety-five of them. But an earlier count had revealed that there were ninety-four. He studies each one and at last finds a young man whose method of death is different. Cadfael believes that the man has been murdered under cover of battle.

“Ninety-four or ninety-five,” said Prestcote, exasperated, “one more or less, what does it matter? Traitors all, and condemned, am I to tear my hair because the number does not tally?”

“Not you, perhaps,” said Cadfael simply, “but God will require an accounting. Ninety-four, including Arnult of Hesden, you had orders to slay. Justified or not, that at least was ordered, you had your sanction, the thing is registered and understood. Any accounting for those comes

¹ Peters, Ellis. *One Corpse Too Many*. New York: Fawcett Crest, 1979. (Ellis Peters is one of the pen names for Edith Mary Pargeter, (28 September 1913 – 14 October 1995) I love the Brother Cadfael mysteries.)

later and in another court. But the ninety-fifth is not in the reckoning, no king authorized his removal out of this world, no castellan had orders to kill him, never was he accused or convicted of rebellion, treason or any other crime, and the man who destroyed him is guilty of murder.” (pg. 39)

War is different from murder. War does not authorize wickedness. Soldiers must discipline themselves that they not fall into cruelty or inhumanity.

Likewise, with the salesperson: Your need to succeed, though it means failure for your competitors, does not authorize wickedness toward those people. You are not to mock them, torture them, or curse them. Indeed, you could well do what Jesus bids concerning your enemies: that you should pray for them.

One of the great themes of our tradition is Luther’s emphasis on Christian vocation. Your job, unless you are a pirate or some other criminal, is your priestly office. It is your location on earth for loving your neighbor and offering the sacrifice of your talents and strengths to God, as a priest should do.

This is true for your job, whatever it is, and however competitive it might be. The blacksmith is a true priest of God, serving his neighbors and offering sacrifices to God by making good horseshoes. The salesperson building the PowerPoint presentation, conducting research, crafting arguments, exercising charm -- all these practices that seem so very secular -- these are the things of your priesthood. People are depending on you. Not only your family, but also your colleagues, even factory workers far off from you. People are depending on you to do your job and to do it well.

On Judgment Day, you will be held accountable for your work on your job. So do your job with all your heart, and leave the rest to God.

And that is not a toss-off line there. When I say “do your job and leave the rest to God,” I am referring to a needful Christian virtue: the virtue of hope. It is the way of Jesus, who after a lifetime of lowliness and service, filled with opposition and a holy competition to win hearts and save souls, all he could do was to bow his head on the cross and commend his spirit into the hands of his heavenly Father.

Hope gazes beyond these threescore and ten years. Hope searches for the One who can solve what is unsolvable here below. In the marketplace, sometimes it is the case that either you win or your competitor wins, but not both of you. Perhaps you win today. Perhaps the competitor wins tomorrow. Err long, you are both going to die and stand before the Triune God. And that is your hope. The question then will be, even as you were defeating your competitor, did you nonetheless count yourself last before your competitor? Did you treat your competitor fairly? Were your weights and measures true? Were you honorable toward your competitor? Did you from time to time say a prayer for your competitor? If so, then go in peace and leave the matter to your Maker, to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to whom belongs the glory, world without end. Amen.