

SERMON  
Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 25  
September 20, 2009

Jeremiah 11:18-20  
Psalm 54  
James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a  
Mark 9:30-37

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

His given name was Abel Head Pierce, but everyone knew him as Shanghai – Shanghai Pierce. He was born June 29, 1834 in Little Compton, Rhode Island, of all places. At age 17 he decided to stow away on a ship headed for Galveston, Texas, to seek, as it were, his fame and fortune. He had 75 cents in his pocket.

When he arrived in Texas, he decided to promote his childhood nickname of Shanghai. He received this nickname because of his height – 6’4, which was extremely tall back in those days. He could never find pants that were long enough for his long legs, so he looked like a breed of long-legged roosters called Shanghai roosters.

From the very start, Shanghai Pierce began to work in the cattle business, bartering a year’s work for \$200 worth of cattle to begin his own herd. After that year of work, he began branding stray cattle and building his herd. In a short period of time, he had built a herd large enough to gain the title of “cattle baron.”

He was quite the site on the Texas plain, wearing brocaded vests, broad-brimmed, high-peaked hats. He even ordered his own gravesite statue prior to his death so that he could enjoy looking at himself.

Supposedly, at sunset he would lift his glass to toast himself as he boldly proclaimed, “Here’s to old Shanghai!” If legend has any truth, his grandiose ego would make Donald Trump look as if he had an inferiority complex.

At his ranch, he decided to build a city with everything his employees would need. He called the town; Thank God, Texas, until some of his more refined friends convinced him that Blessing, Texas, had a better and more acceptable feel.

In his later years, Shanghai invited some of his friends from Boston to visit him on his ranch. He gave them the grand tour, bragging nonstop about his considerable accomplishments in developing this first class city.

As they rode through the dusty streets in a buggy driven by two white horses, Shanghai would point out the various landmarks. “Well, over there’s the commissary – best in the territory. And over there’s the school – two rooms, not one. And over there’s the livery – the best blacksmith in the state of Texas. And over there is the saloon – finest whiskey this side of the Mississippi.”

And the list went on and on, as Shanghai puffed out his chest like his namesake rooster.

As they were continuing on Shanghai’s tour, one of his guests spotted the steeple of a church set in a group of mesquite trees. He asked his host, “Shanghai, do you belong to that church?” Shanghai spat out some tobacco juice and bellowed, “Heck, no! That church belongs to me.”

Today, the Pierce Ranch is still in operation in Wharton County under the management and ownership of the descendants of A. H. Pierce. It consists of approximately 32,000 acres of pastureland, rice and row crops. The original ranch house is still maintained and is marked by a state medallion. In the front yard is a monument erected by the state of Texas in 1932 to honor “Shanghai” Pierce for his contribution to early Texas history.

This is the kind of talk that was going on amongst the disciples in our Gospel story this morning.

Jesus had just told them that he is going to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again. But the disciples did not understand what he was saying. Instead they are arguing about which one of them was the greatest.

Perhaps they were some of Shanghai's early ancestors? Well, evidently, they didn't think Jesus had heard what they were saying. Oops!

When Jesus confronted them, we are told that they remained silent. They were probably following the advice that says; "It is better to remain silent and appear like a fool, than it is to open your mouth and remove all doubt."

So what is it with this persistent drive to become "the greatest?" Not only did the disciples have it, but it seems to be a little part of all of us. And is there anything wrong with that? After all, isn't it good to pursue greatness? Aren't we challenged to be the best that we can be?

Well, let's first take a look at these disciples. It appears that they want to be great without working for it. They think that they should be given greatness just because they hang with Jesus. Just like Jesus turned water into wine and multiplied a few loaves of bread to feed thousands, they want Jesus to just say "poof!" you are all great. But, of course that's not how it works.

Instead Jesus says; "So, you want to be great? You want to be seen as first? If so, then all of you must become last. You must become a servant of all. That is where you will find true greatness."

I remember when I was working in the jewelry business. Out of college, my first job was a Sales Consultant. One year later, I was promoted to Assistant Manager. Less than a year after that, I was asked to become a Store Manager. I remember saying to myself; "I don't care what I have to do to get to the top – basically to become the greatest."

It was not long after that that I crashed and burned big time. Not only career wise, but also mentally. You see, I was seeking greatness for all of the wrong reasons.

Soon I began to realize something was not right. Perhaps it was that small voice of God saying to me, “You have it all wrong. Greatness does not come through power, prestige, position, or possessions. Rather, greatness comes through sacrifice, service, and selflessness.” Wow, that’s kind of different, I thought. That goes against everything that I had come to believe.

With the disciples, Jesus goes one step further. He gives a tangible example of what it means to be a servant of all. He picks up a little child and puts the child among the disciples. He then lifts the child into his arms and says; “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

Now this is more astonishing than you might think at first. After all, “what’s wrong with picking up a cute, helpless, innocent child?” “What great meaning can that have?”

Occasionally in the news we hear about an infant that has been abandoned by his or her parents. Perhaps the child is left at a church door, in a public restroom, or even in a garbage dumpster. If the parent or parents are found, they are normally prosecuted. And we shudder and think; “What sort of a heartless person could do such a thing like that?”

However, in the ancient world, abandonment of infants was a normal practice – a postnatal method of birth control, if you will. And there was no particular stigma attached to it. It was no big deal. For most abandoned children probably survived abandonment, because they were picked up and incorporated into someone’s household.

Sometimes the rescuers were infertile couples who had always desired children. Sometimes they were people who simply needed an extra hand to eventually help out with the work.

There does not seem to have been any formal ceremony by which abandoned infants became a part of the family. Probably the presumption was that, merely by picking such a child up and taking him or her home, a person assumed the role of legal guardian.

This informal arrangement was similar to the ritual in which a father would pick up his own child immediately after birth, thereby acknowledging that the child was his own and pledging to care for him or her. If however, the father refused to lift the child for some reason or another, the child would be abandoned.

It was this Roman custom of raising the newborn infant that probably underlies Jesus' symbolic action in our Gospel story today. For when he picked up the child, it represented adoption. And not only that, but it broke down class barriers. It was a radical form of hospitality.

You see, in that day, childhood was a time of terror. One-third of live births ended in death. Two-thirds of all children died before the age of 16, mainly from disease and hygiene issues. And even though we might not understand it today, Middle Eastern cultures denigrated children and saw them as having limited if any worth.

Even the medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas taught that in a fire a husband was first obliged to save his father, then his mother, then his wife, and then if he had time, save the children.

During a time of famine, children were also last to be fed. Survival of the fittest. Survival of the greatest. Survival of the best.

So when Jesus tells the people to become like little children, he insults them, he insults their culture, he insults their values. Therefore, Jesus challenges the entire system of belief. And I believe that still holds true for today. Jesus still challenges us.

Jesus calls us to love one another, even our enemies. He calls us forgive those we might deem as unforgiveable. He calls us to care for those who suffer from the pressures of everyday life. He calls us to be servants of all – to become like a child, trusting only in the one who gives and sustains life.

I would like to close with a thought that I had when wrestling with this text. I struggled with how these words of Jesus can come alive for us today. And this is what I came up with.

I don't think that Jesus is telling the disciples and us that we shouldn't pursue greatness. I don't think he is saying that we shouldn't be the best that we can be.

Instead, I think that we are not to pursue greatness for the sake of greatness itself – as a means to an end, as portrayed by Shanghai Pierce in my opening story. I believe that the disciples would have been fine if they had just finished the sentence.

They said, "I want to be the greatest." Rather, Jesus would have us say; "I want to be the greatest...so that." "I want to be the greatest... so that."

"I want to be the greatest doctor so that I can deliver the best of healthcare to the people who have none." "I want to be the greatest teacher so that I can help children to develop their full potential." "I want to be the greatest parent so that I can be an example of what it means to unconditionally love someone."

"I want to be the greatest soccer player so that I can be a positive role model for others." "I want to be the greatest actor or actress so that I can portray characters that will inspire people to change the world for the better."

You see what I'm trying to say? Instead of being great for our own sake, we are to pursue greatness for the sake of others. It is in this way that we will become servants of all. And it is also the way to experience the joy that God intended for us.

Has your quest for greatness for your own sake brought you nothing but hurt and despair? Have you hurt others in your climb to the top? Have you found that being the greatest is a lonely place to be? Try doing it solely for the sake of others. And your joy will be made complete.

For imagine a world where everyone thinks of the other before him or herself. Imagine the joy, the love, the friendship, that would be possible in such a world. The answer is in the life of a servant, in the voice of a child. Indeed, God certainly works in mysterious ways. Amen.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting. Amen.

## CHILDREN'S SERMON

Have any of you ever seen a little rug or mat that said the word "WELCOME" on it? Where do you usually see those?

What does the word "welcome" mean? *We are glad to see you, please come in*

Now how many of you have ever said; "Me first! Me first!"

Do you like to be first? What are some things that you like to be first in: Running a race, the line to get food, to get to church on Sunday morning?

But sometimes it's hard to be first when you're a little kid, isn't it? Because you are not as big or as strong as people who are older than you, it's hard to be first.

But in our Bible story today, Jesus got angry with all of the adults who only wanted to be first. Instead he lifted up a little boy or girl just like you and he told the adults to welcome little children, because they didn't get to be first very often.

So are you welcome here in church? Absolutely. You are always welcome here, because we love you, and we know that Jesus would want us to welcome everyone, no matter what.

Let us pray... O Lord, you are a God who welcomes all into your presence, especially little children. Help us to welcome and love others as you have welcomed and love us. Amen.