

“Who is Right... Who is Left?”
A Word in Season for a Church in Distress

Based on Mark 10:35-45

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by Bishop Wayne N. Miller

As many of you may know I have been, for many years, fond of building my sermons around a center point, sometimes provided by a story... more often by a familiar image from everyday experience. And as I was thinking this week about the little story of James and John quarreling on the road and, in general, about the issue of Christian authority, for some odd reason the image that came to mind was... this baseball bat.

Don't laugh. This is becoming an important piece of equipment for bishops these days... in fact, we have been thinking of replacing the traditional symbol of the shepherd's staff with something a little more substantially authoritative...

Actually, I suspect that this image came to mind at least partly because of the season of year we are in... World Series and all that... an event that we used to associate with the beginning of a new school year, but which is now more of a Halloween/Thanksgiving sort of experience. There is always a little sadness for me in the World Series, because even though I'm not exactly a fanatic baseball fan... baseball is definitely my game. And I have to admit that I like baseball for exactly the reasons that most people don't.

I like the slowness of it... the deliberate unrushed pace... the more subtle kinds of strategy in the way a great pitcher works the batter toward a strike out... or maybe the interesting way in which baseball expresses the tension between “right” and “left.” I mean, we take right-handedness and left-handedness as a matter of indifference most of the time.

But choosing to place a bunt down the 3rd base line over there on the left or the 1st base line over there on the right can make all the difference sometimes between winning and losing a game, or even a season. And whether you put a left-handed or a right-handed pinch-hitter against a right-handed pitcher is no small thing either.

The batters that have the real advantage are the switch-hitters; that is, the ones that can swing with equal competence from either the right or the left, just to keep everyone guessing.

Of course, the significance of whether you swing from the right or swing from the left should not be unfamiliar to us in this society of ours, where just about everyone these days, is required to identify themselves by whether they approach life from the right or from the left.

We choose the radio station we listen to, for example, or the television news we watch, largely on the basis of whether the person in the box is yapping at us from the left or from the right.

In the health care debate...it seems like just about everyone these days has declared whether to swing at the problem from the right by not changing much of anything or to take a swing from the left by changing just about everything.

Some on the left think that the way to fix the economy is to make more resources available to the average homeowner... or perhaps to those who have no resources at all... while those who swing from the right remain convinced that the help needs to go to the corporate interests that will eventually create the jobs that the people on the left need to sustain all those left-leaning lifestyles of theirs.

And now, of course, in a very dramatic way, in the life of our Church, since the fateful decisions about human sexuality in Minneapolis a few months ago, we face the struggle between a right that is convinced beyond doubt that we have run way outside of the base line on this one, and a left that is equally convinced that those on the right are completely off base. All of which is leaving some of us wondering, “After we finally figure out who is right, who will be left?”

The interesting thing about baseball in all this, however... a little detail that you may not have paid much attention to... is that the right hand approach and the left hand approach, as completely different as they may appear, have at least one thing in common... which is that both swings are centered in exactly the same place... a place known to all of the players as, "home." In fact, if either player wanders too far from that same immovable center, they can pretty much count on the fact that in a very short time, they're gonna be outta here.

The gospel selection appointed for this week finds the sons of Zebedee locked in a dispute about who was going to be on the right and who was going to be on the left-hand side of Jesus in glory. Clearly it was a matter of considerable importance to them. But Jesus sort of avoids the issue of right-handedness and left-handedness altogether, by calling all of his friends back to the center... to a remembrance of the one baptism that they share and the one cup they must all drink and the service to the least that is their common vocation... and ultimately, to the way of the cross...

The way of the cross... which is, and has always been, foolishness to those on the right and a stumbling block to those on the left. Because the cross, rather than resolving all the distinctions between this and that or between right and left, plants us squarely in the center of the paradox... a paradox in which things that appear to be contradictory opposites are, in fact, inseparably connected.

It is, after all, the image of Christ crucified that centers us in the truth that:

Strength is perfected in weakness;
That surrender is the path to victory;
That sacrifice is the path to abundance
That servitude is the path to freedom
And that death is the path to life.

As we meander through life dodging from left to right and back again trying to climb up by putting others down it is the Jesus who makes us his own through water and word and bread and wine... it is this same Christ crucified that relentlessly pulls us back to the center every single day.

Because in those moments when you would rather deny your guilt and sin, it is the cross that calls you back, sisters and brothers...it is the cross that calls you back to confess what you want so much to deny.

And when you are inclined to condemn those who are different from you, it is the cross that calls you to forgive the very thing you are inclined to condemn.

And when you are tempted to follow the Siren song of a world that teaches you daily to cling to so many things that do not give life, the cross calls you to let go of the very things you want most to hold onto.

And when your all-too-human heart calls you to run from the thing you are afraid of, it is the cross that calls you back to confront the very thing you are most afraid to face.

All of which, by the way calls me back to center us once again... here in the midst of this season in which we happen to find ourselves. Because I will tell you honestly that one of the things that is most troubling to me as a bishop in the turbulent time is to see congregations calling pastors or even synods calling bishops purely on the basis of whether their opinions on certain issues swing too far to the left or too far to the right... and so COMPLETELY MISSING THE POINT! They miss the point that the vocation of a pastor is precisely to keep the people of God centered through all the changes in the wind and the passing of the seasons... to keep the people centered in water and word, in bread and wine, and in the image of Christ crucified as the source of our life and salvation... Christ alone, Christ alone, Christ alone. Believe this. Trust this. Bear witness to this!

So today, I ask you, fellow pilgrims, and servants on this sacred way, friends and colleagues, teachers and mentors of a lifetime... I ask you to join me now in re-centering ourselves in this glorious but sometimes terrifying vocation we share to call this Church patiently and persistently back to its center when it is inclined to swing a bit too far to the left or perhaps to the right... and in keeping it centered in that cross, to lead it faithfully home.