

Sermon: Palm Sunday  
Christ Church Riverdale, 13 April 2009  
The Rev. Robert C. Lamborn, Rector

Jiverly Wong couldn't hold down a steady job, his girlfriend left him when he got laid off, and his daughter lives far away. Some people made fun of Wong because his English was so poor--even people close to him--and he felt isolated and degraded to the point of irrationality. Bursting into the American Civic Association in Binghamton with two handguns and plenty of ammunition, his actions spoke a language of death that required no translation. He took 13 lives and then his own, destroying the lives of scores of family and loved ones of his victims. He took advantage of the trust and openness of the very institution that tried to help him improve his English. Do the circumstances that contributed to Wong's rampage of destruction justify what he did, excuse what he did? Of course not! But neither should that keep us from taking a closer look to do our best to prevent similar tragedies in the future.

"The sense that you are nothing or nobody can drive one to violence and unreason. Through all human history it has been the hidden motive—that unbearable desire to prove oneself somebody—behind countless insanities and acts of violence." (Fuller, 49) So wrote the author John W Fowles, a veteran of World War I, whose brother killed in that war leaving wife and children. This quotation is particularly significant to Robert Fuller, professor of physics at Columbia University, then the youngest president of in the history of Oberlin College until the mid-1970s. A few years afterward, Fuller tried to renew his connections among grant-making foundations, hoping to fund a new project, but people didn't even return his phone calls any more. He's reflected on that experience and the life of our nation in his book, *Somebodies and Nobodies: Overcoming the Abuse of Rank* (New Society Publishers, 2003).

Fuller explains that rank itself isn't the problem, but that often rank is abused to disrespect others, or to confer privilege that hasn't been earned. With rank comes recognition, and without rank, people often describe feeling invisible and ignored, like nobodies. Having been quite somebody as a college president, Fuller learned what it means to be what he calls a "nobody," and how "somebodies" often work hard to keep that position of power. "Attachment to somebody status is . . . futile and self-defeating. . . ," he writes. "Somebodies who can't get down off their pedestals, turn into statues." (p. 41)

According to Fuller, people relegated to "nobody" status often try to find someone else to be better than, someone to bully. Life is full of examples: if you don't feel good about yourself, it feels better to put down somebody else because of race or ethnicity or religion or sexual orientation or disability or gender or whatever. "The entertainment value of humiliation [is] a staple of television and movies. . . ." Fuller writes. The perverse pleasure of witnessing the denigration of some hapless victim on the screen is a way of letting go of our internalized, pent-up rage." (p. 22)  
Well, people were finding entertainment value in humiliation long before television and movies: crucifixion was intended not only to be painful, but even more important in that society, it was shaming.

In first-century Palestine, Pontius Pilate was really somebody. He was the local representative of the mighty power of Rome with plenty of soldiers to back his authority up, if things got iffy. To Pilate, Jesus of Nazareth was a nobody, someone whose case wasn't worth considering on its merits, but could capriciously be given to the mob for a verdict. Even before seeing Pilate, Jesus became a nobody to his right-hand man when Peter, out of fear, denies him not one but three times, cursing and saying, "I do not know the man!" Jesus of Nazareth, really somebody as people shouted and waved palm branches on his way into Jerusalem became a nobody by the time he trudged to Golgotha with common criminals. Despite the sarcastic title, "King of the Jews" over his head, he was taunted as a nobody even by those criminals.

Yet some of God's best work has been with nobodies: Moses, called to be leader of the Israelites in Egypt: he's got a speech impediment and has killed a man. The people in Egypt responsible for keeping the Hebrew baby boys from being killed according to Pharaoh's edict? Just a couple of midwives named Shifrah and Puah. Israel's first great king? A youngster named David, good with a sling. The prophet Amos? Not born & educated to be a prophet, but a goatherd and tree-trimmer by trade. The woman to give birth to the Son of God? An engaged teenager living out in the sticks. The savior of the world? Some country preacher who had his fifteen minutes of fame with a parade into Jerusalem, but whose closest followers cut and run the minute he's arrested.

God's best work has been with nobodies, or I should say people who *seem* like nobodies. You see, God doesn't create people to be nobodies, but in the image of God. Being a nobody is category we humans impose; each person is a somebody to God. That's good news indeed . . . but it doesn't mean we're off the hook. Each person is a somebody to God. The way we say it in our baptismal vows is by promising to strive for justice and peace among all people, and to respect the dignity of every human being. Robert Fuller's work has moved from identifying and describing the characteristics and effects of rankism to working to see that every human being is treated with equal dignity. As Christians it is work we can eagerly share in, work that can be a gift to the world and may even help reduce the likelihood of people feeling the only way to prove they're somebody is with a gun.

Matthew 19:30 is the very familiar verse, "Many that are first shall be last, and the last shall be first." John Dominic Crossan of the Jesus Seminar has translated it, "The somebodies will be nobodies and the nobodies will be somebodies." (p. 155) We may not be a Moses, or a Shifrah or Puah, a David or an Amos; we're not Mary or Jesus. Our struggles for human dignity may not show up in the media but they are no less important. Knowing they are important God calls us to those struggles for dignity and entrusts us with gifts to address the challenges and the courage to meet them, just as God gave Jesus the courage to walk toward his execution as willingly as he rode in the parade for his coronation, fully willing to become a nobody for our sake and for the sake of the world.