

The Rev. Wayne Nicholson
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St. John's Episcopal Church, Mount Pleasant
22nd Pentecost, Sts Simon and Jude

I read on Tuesday that Britney Spears, longtime champion of traditional marriage and family values, has been given visiting rights to her children. Again. According to the web blog celebspin.com, she arrived at the Beverly Hills Hotel Wednesday for her first Parenting Without Conflict session. A court had ordered Britney to attend the classes to regain her visiting rights.

This just in from Planet Gossip: It seems that among the rich and famous and sometimes vacuous, *black* is the color of the day. Yes, yes, black is the new black. "It was a trip to the dark side for some of our fave glamour gals at Monday night's Hollywood Awards. While we've seen how fab Catherine Zeta-Jones looked in her black Herve Leger dress, there's *more* fabulousness for you. Janet Jackson donned a vintage Alaïa to present the Best Ensemble Award to *Hairspray*. A leggy Amanda Bynes took to the stage to help accept the award in Alice + Olivia. And Ms. Kirstie Alley proved that she was keeping her weight in check by wearing a body-hugging, bosom-bearing number from Dolce & Gabbana to present Best Supporting Actor to her best buddy John Travolta."

(In another story, we learn that Catherine Zeta-Jones actually had her dress on *backwards*.)

Fifty-three year old Jackie Chan, known for his daredevil movie stunts, has recorded "We are ready," the official countdown song for the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics. He praised the lyrics, one refrain of which is "'Waiting year after year/ We can see into the future/ Together with hard work and sweat, we've created the five different (Olympic) colors."

I'm inspired.

Fortunately, the church does not celebrate celebrities.

We celebrate saints.

The distinction is an important one, says English theologian John Pridemore. "The lives of celebrities are public exhibitions. The notion of a hidden celebrity is nonsense – but it is otherwise with the saints. We know a lot about some saints, but about most we know little or nothing. And none of that great company – not Simon, not Jude – would have it otherwise. We honor them for their very hiddenness."

Of the saints we've been honoring the past couple of months, we've had some well-known like St. Luke, and then there have been others, like Barnabas. I must

admit that while it has been a real challenge to preach about the obscure holy ones, I've also learned things along the way. And one of the things I've learned is that a mark of sainthood seems to be humility.

The most obvious or memorable example of holy humility would probably be Francis – remember how he refused his father's enormous legacy, tore off his very fine furs, velvets, and brocades, and took on the humble clothing and virtuous life of a monk. But I think we can point to the tradition that many of our celebrated saints died in confession to show that the holy humility of sainthood is more common than not.

In twelve-step groups we are often reminded that *humility* is *not* the same as *humiliation*. On the contrary, humility, *true* humility, is not a groveling, self-despising spirituality; it is more the right view of ourselves *as God sees us*. It is as though we could enter the heart of God, look back on ourselves, and see ourselves clearly, without pretention, without guile or falsehood. And it is this characteristic, I believe, that runs through the lives of the saints.

It is this characteristic as well, the characteristic of a humble human heart, that allows us to love one another as Jesus tells us to do.

In today's Gospel lesson, our patron, John, is speaking to a community whose world challenges belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God. I believe that Jesus is calling his followers to reject "business as usual," to reject the ways of the world that stand in opposition to his ways, to his revelation of the love of God in his life and death. And the way this is done is through humble submission to Jesus Christ as Lord – as opposed, say, through humble submission to Rudy Giuliani or Hillary Rodham Clinton.

The ways of the world are *counter* to a humble spirit. The ways of the world inspire pride and arrogance – the way of Christ inspires a modesty generated by God's grace, a willingness to surrender the self to the all-embracing love of God.

And it is in that surrender, that submission, that we gain our freedom – and it is through that freedom that we are able to love.

The community centered on Christ calls the world and its culture into question by its radical obedience to the one commandment of Jesus Christ: "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34-35) In a radical obedience and a radical surrender, our humility will *allow* us to love one another – because our pride, our egos, our sense of self-importance – they've all been *shattered* by love.

Think about how we, as a church, are a community. Yes, certainly, we're here together this morning to worship – to pray and praise, to sing and be joyful. But

by our very act of being here, we've been countercultural. According to the Gallup poll, 43% of American adults say they attend church on a typical weekend. But are people telling the truth about their behavior? Do people overestimate their church attendance when polled? Yes! The actual rate of attendance from 'head counts' is less than half of what the pollsters report. Numbers from actual counts of people in orthodox Christian churches show that 18.7% of the population attended a Christian church on any given weekend in 2000. ¹ *We are part of a minority!* And to willingly join a minority, we have humbled ourselves. We've said, in effect, "What the majority of our culture does on a Sunday morning is less important than my relationship with God, a relationship that is nourished by worship at my church."

That, in itself, is a sign of humility. To willingly be counter-cultural can, of course, be a matter of pride ("Hey, look at me – aren't I special?!") – but I suggest to you that this is rarely a motivation to attend church.

No, I think what happens to us is that we've found a way of relating to one another – and to the world – that is important, foundational, transformative. We've been willing to submit, to surrender, to the love of God in Christ Jesus that comes to us through, in, and around, our worship – and in that submission, in that surrender, in that *humbleness of spirit* we have found a love that caresses us and surrounds us and supports us – a love that we cannot help but wanting to share.

The saints are our models. They are the icons through which we catch glimpses of the holy, mere fragments of understanding about who God is and what God wants of us mortals. Their humility in the face of public persecution, public ridicule, and physical pain is an image of love that is both humble and powerful.

I suggest to you that it is their very humility that has allowed them to love God in ways that inspire us all. And it is in their love of God through Christ that they have expressed a love for humankind, their brothers and sisters.

The commandment of Jesus that we love one another is revealed over and over in the love of saints – and it is the path of discipleship that they have walked that we are asked to follow.

By loving.

With humility.

And with joy.

Amen.

¹ *12 Surprising Facts about the American Church*, by David T. Olsen, 2004.