

SERMON: 9/19/21

Dr. Harry Schmitz
St. John's Stanford

A teacher gave a balloon to students assembled in the school auditorium. The teacher told them to inflate the balloon, write their name on it, throw it outside the auditorium door into the school hallway, and return to their seats. The teacher then went into the hall and mixed up all the balloons. The students were then given 5 minutes to go into the hallway to find their own balloon.

Despite a very hectic and confusing search, not one student found their balloon. They were very disappointed. Some were even sad. At that point the teacher told the students to take the first balloon that they found and give it to the person whose name was written on it. Within five minutes everyone had their own balloon.

The teacher said to the students, "These balloons are like happiness. We will never find happiness if everyone is only looking for their own. But if we care about other people's happiness... we'll find our happiness also."

You know, balloons can be a metaphor for ourselves, our dreams, and life itself. They are free, tense when inflated, and can relax if we let some air out of them after inflating them too much. Balloons also surprise us when we stress them too much and then explode with a big pop. We always have a startle response and often laugh when it happens.

Whatever balloons mean to us, they typically bring a smile to our faces, especially when we see children play with them, or have them around at birthday and graduation celebrations, and on days like today, our Great Welcome Back Sunday. We use balloons at Easter also as egg-shaped symbols of new life. Children love them and want one when they see them.

Balloons are simple and humble toys. Their vibrant colors are a joy in themselves, especially when light streams through them. They can appear, when filled with helium and bunched together, to be floating stained glass windows in the sky.

The vibrancy of balloons on so many levels can inspire the realization that we, each of us, you, and I, are much like single balloons. We too can be filled with light. When we stick together, we

can accomplish things we couldn't do alone. We can soar to the heavens in imagining and building a more loving, compassionate, and happier world.

The teacher in our balloon story today made this very point with students finding their own happiness through helping others. Serving the needs of another is indeed a Godly thing.

Jesus says as much in his encounter with his disciples in today's Gospel story. Jesus rebukes them for arguing with each other over who will be the greatest among them. They really seem to be asking Jesus to say which one he likes best. One gets the feeling that Jesus had to tamp down an argument like little ones arguing over toys and games. So, how do you suppose the disciples' argument went.

I would say there are two possibilities to determine if either is accurate.

The first possibility! Each disciple said, "I'm the best of all." And the others said: "Not so. Can't be. Are you kidding me? Everyone knows as Jesus does that, I'm the best."

The second possibility! Peter saying, "You're the best disciple Andrew." And Andrew replying "No, I'm not. You are the best of us Peter." And on and on the argument went with each apostle naming someone other than themselves to be the best and that person saying, "Oh no, not me. Don't be ridiculous. You are."

Let's look at each of these possibilities.

With the first possibility, each disciple was putting themselves ahead of everybody else, saying "I'm first, I'm the best."

With the second possibility, each disciple made themselves to be less important than everybody else, saying "I'm last, the smallest of all."

It's easy to see this as a story of Jesus reprimanding those who said they were trying to be first. Without thinking it through, it's easy to conclude that Jesus could not have reprimanded them for saying they were trying to be the least. But if we think about the whole story a bit further, these interpretations ignore what's really going on. Earlier in our story, Jesus tells them how to be first by offering them a roadmap, a plan on how to really achieve success in life.

Jesus tells them that they must be the servant of all if they wish to in first place. And if they all follow this roadmap, then they will be in first place by serving others with their unique gifts, the

gifts God has given them. Clearly, Jesus would not have explained how to get to first place if he thought becoming first was wrong.

Now let's look at the second possibility. In this possibility every disciple was trying to be in last place. They wanted to be the least. They wanted to appear small and humble. But that doesn't stand up under further scrutiny. As soon as I or you say I'm humble, we are automatically disqualified from being humble.

Jesus is absolutely calling every one of his followers to strive for greatness by accepting the gifts God has given them. Jesus is saying to each disciple, and that includes you and me, to use the unique gifts God has given each of us in the service of love to another, especially another in need. Jesus is as much as saying we will never find happiness if everyone is only looking for their own. But if we care about other people's happiness... we'll find our happiness also.

To engage in tenderness with one another offers a chance, a clear opportunity to get away from the negative energy in our culture where we face an ongoing onslaught of aggressive individualism and the soul dimming noise of the latest bad news.

All of this is enough to deflate us, to literally take the air out of us. No wonder we sometimes become down, deflated and energy hungry to fly above it all. Even the weather stations hype the bad news. And balloons need good weather too.

We are so hungry these days for freshness, gladness, joy in our days and in our lives. Joy that a balloon can bring. Joy that our imagination can bring. Joy that a child can bring. Joy that comes by developing a childlike attitude.

In our Gospel story, Jesus offers an alternative to the doom and gloom of bad news. He invites us to fall in love just as a child does. In encouraging us to be childlike Jesus invites us to approach life with imagination, vulnerability, curiosity, joy, and without fear of making mistakes, for Jesus knows this is how every one of us learns and grows in wisdom and grace. Jesus welcomes us fully as we are and calls us to be the truest and most compassionate expression of our single uniqueness as a child of God.

When people strive to be first in this way, competition cannot exist. No one can get ahead of another no matter the greatness achieved. All are together in the Lord. And this Jesus who is Lord of all does indeed show us the way to love and service. This is the way in which becoming the servant of all makes you first.

So, go and be the first best expression the self you can be and do so with your unique gifts while serving others, especially those in need. You may not yet know what your best possible self could be or have a full understanding of your uniqueness as someone whom God loves unconditionally.

Perhaps you are still searching. Consider falling in love with something that will make your balloon soar to the sky. I'd like to share some words written by a Jesuit. I believe these words are particularly relevant.

These words are often attributed to Fr. Pedro Arrupe, SJ (1907–1991), but were written by Joseph Whelan, SJ

Nothing is more practical than
finding God, than
falling in Love
in a quite absolute, final way.
What you are in love with,
what seizes your imagination, will affect everything.
It will decide
what will get you out of bed in the morning,
what you do with your evenings,
how you spend your weekends,
what you read, whom you know,
what breaks your heart,
and what amazes you with joy and gratitude.
Fall in Love, stay in love,
and it will decide everything.

Amen