

In the alphabetized list of sins that I daily seek to confess, *condescension* and *contempt* are among the earlier mentioned, but they go with another I mention later, *self-righteousness*. That is an honest way of acknowledging to you that I too easily can look down my nose at some human foibles and behaviors, and that doing so allows me to feel smugly superior.

And to feel smugly superior to those humans who write letters to such columns might be the reason that I persist in reading an advice column that appears daily in the Tucson newspaper, the "Arizona Star." The column is by one Amy Dickinson and is syndicated by the Chicago Tribune, the place I first encountered it, and I even e-mailed Dickinson once commenting that she was the "David Beckham of advice columnists." For those of you unfamiliar with his name, he was the world's biggest soccer star some years back, and if you want a warm, entertaining movie, especially for your granddaughters, watch "Bend It Like Beckham," named after the way he could kick goals.

At any rate, not very long ago, a woman wrote to Amy — and I am puzzled that in searching in web archives I did not find this specific column — and I could not avoid condescension as the woman told how she and her husband and their daughter and the daughter's husband had been to dinner at an apparently decent restaurant and received good service (though I think there was an admission by the woman that she had been difficult to please). The woman's husband had left a ten percent tip, and the woman was upset that as they left the table, they heard their daughter and her husband apologize to the waitress and give her an additional tip. I do not remember whether the woman felt embarrassed or what, but she wrote that she thought her daughter was wrong to do this.

Amy, bless her heart, sided with the daughter and explained that tips are the way waiters and waitresses largely make their livings, and that as a matter of custom, tips for good service are now commonly twenty percent. Like many of you, I remember when fifteen was the norm, but I believe in treating waiters and waitresses — who often must share those tips with others — per the convention.

In other words, it is appropriate to tip the server for service.

*Server, service.* Clearly, *server, service* and *servant* come from the same root, *serve*, and as last Sunday, our reading from the Hebrew Bible is one of the Servant Songs written by the second of the prophets we call “Isaiah.” These two are the only of the four such songs that we shall read this year, but many of you know the words of another, “He was despised and rejected, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief,” words that Handel set to music in “The Messiah.” And Handel’s doing so represents the fact that at least many Christians, if not most, read into these songs that they foretell Jesus.

Which is fine, though in their context they pretty well spell out that they are referring to the nation — the people — of Judah, which is to say, to the Jewish people, variously called “Israel” or “Jacob” or other names, with “Zion” sometimes also used. And I love the idea of the people of Israel — substitute the Christian Church — as “a light to the nations,” “nations” being those who were not Jewish, the *Gentiles*.

What this second Isaiah and the somewhat earlier Jeremiah wrote was fascinating in its context. God does not really change from Old Testament to the New, but within the Old Testament the understanding of God by the Hebrews — and especially by their prophets — changes; evolves. “Yes,” the Hebrews are privileged because God has blessed them with a home and with *Torah*, the Law, but prior to Jeremiah and this second Isaiah, the most responsibility the Hebrews thought they owed God was to worship God alone and — which was a major concern of the first of the Isaiah’s and the prophet Amos — to be fair and just to their fellow Hebrews, but other than to treat with love aliens in their midst, those in the world who were not Jews were not their concern. That changed with Jeremiah and this second Isaiah: The people of Israel were to be God’s servant, and by very proper hermeneutics — a fancy word I wanted to throw out, simply meaning that I think I am properly using the Scripture in my preaching — by very proper extension and interpretation, we, the Church of Jesus Christ, are called to be *God’s servant*.

Let's soak that in for a moment. We, the Church of Jesus Christ, "Church" with a capital "C," are called to be *God's servant*. The Church is not to serve us; we *are* the Church; we as the Church are to serve God.

I have spent a fair amount of my time recently dealing with "*what do people want of their churches,?*" for which I am using a small "c." If we really mean it when we say that we take seriously the messages of the Bible, that is the wrong question, both the wrong question for me to be asking members of a church, and for members of a church themselves to be answering. I do not mean that to be damning of anyone, we are all human and we of course have what we consider our wants and needs, but if our question is, "What can the church do to make me happy," none of us has paid any attention to our call from Jesus Christ to make disciples of all nations — of all people.

This Friday, the United States will inaugurate a new President, and I doubt that his inaugural speech, or *address*, will be any less self-justifying nor any more unifying than the at times soaring but ultimately self-congratulatory and defensive speech I heard from his predecessor this past Tuesday. Indeed, while most of you will probably "Trump me" on this one, in my admittedly limited listening to or reading of inaugural addresses, the two most memorable were Lincoln's Second Inaugural, the one in which he put forth that the Civil War was God's punishment inflicted on the United States for slavery, and the one line that Ted Sorenson inserted in John F. Kennedy's inaugural (that was apparently a frequent quote of the head master of Kennedy's prep school), "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." It was a line that inspired countless of young people, but the point is not whether or not one was a fan of John F. Kennedy, as a college freshman when he voiced those words, I admit I was not, though no one hated political opponents then the way they do now, and those words are completely non-partisan and essentially non-ideological — and should be beyond debate; who could disagree with them?

And yet, if we are honest with ourselves, when we pray — and I hope that each of us does pray, — while we might often ask favors of God, do we ever ask, “What can I do for *you*, God?”

Now, I want to be gentle; there are certainly those who do ask how we can serve those who need help, but what is more important to us as a congregation, that we hear a decent sermon on Sunday morning and go home feeling that it was worth the bother, or, that someone (even a pastor) visited one of our members who can no longer attend church?

Which responds to the call to being a servant of Christ?

Well, I am going to say they both do, though the latter clearly more than the former; worship prepares us — or is intended partly to prepare us — to go out into the world and be God’s servants, but if worship is the extent of what we do together, we can never consider ourselves as a church, can never consider ourselves part of Christ’s Church. I am very caustic about the PCUSA’s move for “1000 New Worshipping Communities” — though maybe we will take advantage of a grant to try some sort of educational program in Anthem, — “caustic” because worshipping by itself simply is *not* being Christ’s Church.

And while all that sounds very much about “church,” that is not all that it is! The *nation* to which this second Isaiah was directing God’s words as he understood them — and I think we all would agree they sound like what we know God to want, — Israel, was not just a *nation*, but a nation of hundreds of thousands of individuals, just as Christ’s Church is composed of over a billion individuals. Christ’s call, like Isaiah’s call, is not just to the Church or the nation *collectively*, but to all those of us *individuals* who comprise it.

Not just as church, both small and large “C,” not just as church, but as individuals, you and I, are called to be servants! To be Christ’s servants, which means carrying his love — which might require care and compassion and some transferring of wealth — to

others on His behalf. As individuals within Christ's Church, we are called not just to be entertained or even to be motivated and moved nor to be comforted, but to motivate and move and to comfort others! To find a way to contribute to the great mission I mentioned earlier to which he calls us.

"But wait, what's in it for me? Don't I get anything in return?"

Guess what; we already have. Christ died for you and me. If we truly believe in Him, we know that we shall never die; we know that we are loved unconditionally. So why should we not show our thanks for what he has done *servicing us* by giving, not just tipping ten percent, oops, tithing the church is generous, not even tipping twenty percent, but *giving* ourselves completely, one hundred percent, to His calling, not as a *tip*, but as the measure of our thanks.

In His name.

Amen