

In late August of 2001, I was cogitating on what Jesus might have meant when He said, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” A friend mentioned in a conversation that her brother loved to travel in high style. His *modus operandi* was to wait until he got to the airport, where he would then upgrade from Coach to First Class. So, while the two conversions – Jesus’s challenge to his disciples, a passenger with his plane ticket – danced in my mind, I recalled hearing Dr. Fred Craddock preach a sermon in which he had a heart-to-heart talk with a dog resting by the fireplace. Thanks to the grace of God, Scriptures, conversation, and creativity merged to become a narrative that was delivered for the first time just a few days before 9-11.

May the blessings and peace of Christ be with you and yours.

Shalom,

James

***“My Name is Jesus, and I Will Be Your Waiter Today”***

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, September 23, 2012

First delivered on Sunday, September 1, 2001

The Rev. Dr. James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

<sup>33</sup> Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" <sup>34</sup> But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. <sup>35</sup> He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." – **Mark 9: 33-35**

Something happened to Brian Mulberry, only he wasn't sure what it meant. When the day began, it had all seemed so routine. He liked routine. He liked to know what was on the agenda for the day, so he could plan and anticipate and prepare and be ready. He got up that Monday morning at his usual time and got dressed for the day. He had packed his suitcase the night before so all he had to do was feed Whiskers and drop her off next door. Brian was glad that Mrs. Oxford loved cats in general and Whiskers in particular. When he thanked Mrs. Oxford for the third time she shushed Brian and said, "Honey, she has a home here anytime you leave for one of your trips. And don't worry about your mail; I've still got your key from the last time. Whiskers, would you like to sit on the window seat in front of the aquarium?" Brian imagined he could hear Whiskers purring and drooling at the same time.

The taxi was waiting in front. Telling the Cabbie not to rush, Brian tilted his head back to enjoy the ride. He went to adjust his tie and realized he had forgotten to put one on. Oh, that's okay, he thought, I have plenty in my suitcase. Everything is fine. He always went to the airport too early in case traffic was heavy. Brian liked to get to the airport early, but he always checked in at the last minute. He would time his check in so as to upgrade to First Class and get unclaimed seats. There was so much about First Class that Brian loved. He didn't have to pay, because his clients

picked up the tab. He didn't have to talk, because his fellow passengers spent the flight either sleeping or typing on their lap tops or talking on the phone with their clients. He didn't have to eat beforehand, because the food was good, considering he was sitting in the sky 36,000 feet above earth.

So it was with a voice of confident expectancy that he said to the ticket agent, "I would like to upgrade to First Class, please." She said, "I am sorry sir, we are over-booked. First Class is full. We do have you listed as sitting on the last row, in 32B between seats A and C. May I see your ID please? And have you packed your own bags yourself? Did anyone ask you to carry a bag on board for them?"

Ten minutes later Brian found himself seated on the last row between seats A and C. In A was a woman of about 27, with short, curly brown hair sporting a red sweatshirt that read, "If the momma ain't happy, ain't nobody happy." Momma Ain't Happy was looking out her window at the luggage being loaded, as if she expected to see her own bags get heaved into the luggage compartment by the two men in jumpsuits on the tarmac below. In seat C was a guy his own age, wearing a wrinkled suit, a day's growth of beard, and an odd expression. Brian snuck a second glance at Mr. Rumpled Suit's tie; it had a stain that looked like ketchup or salsa. Brian guessed that he had been traveling for 24 hours and had not changed. But he was wrong.

Suddenly Brian snapped to attention. Momma Ain't Happy was poking him in the ribs. "Did you see that? Did you see that?" She punctuated her sentences with pokes to his ribs. "He dropped a lady's bag! Oh my God, her clothes are on the runway. Look, look, look at that. He's picking up her clothes and stuffing them back in like it is a sleeping bag and not the Eddie Bauer bag that it is. Oh no! Look, look, look at that, he doesn't see the purple and gold and green blouse, can you see, the one with a wide collar and square buttons. Well, she is probably

better off without it anyway. Where could she wear it? Unless she got it as a present and the person who gave it to her is coming to her house for coffee and she wants to make her feel good. Or maybe it's a present for someone in the family she is going to visit, and when she gets there it will be too late to buy another present and she will know, I swear to God, when she opens her bag she will know -- she will know! — that it popped open at the airport and some man re-packed her bag but left her purple and gold and green blouse with the wide color and square buttons to sit on the runway and get run over by a Delta jumbo jet.”

Brian was so ready to deplane and they hadn't taken off yet. He smiled and nodded and then closed his eyes to pray for tail winds.

“Hey, buddy, you want something to drink with those?” Brian opened his eyes. He must have dozed and slept through take off. A hand was shaking his shoulder and the guy in the rumpled suit was talking to him. Mr. Rumpled Suit's tray was open in front of him, and on it was an upside down bag of peanuts that read in bold letters, “No resale. Reselling this product strictly prohibited by law and punishable by fine or imprisonment or both.”

“Sir, do you need cream or sugar with that?” The stewardess was talking to him. She looked like she had been on her feet for hours and hours, and it was only 10 a.m. She gave Brian her professional smile as she handed him a Styrofoam cup filled with coffee. Brian had an instant flashback memory of the fine china in first class, and for a moment he was 32 rows closer to the pilot, not sitting next to the bathrooms, and he was holding steaming hot hickory flavor coffee with real cream, and he felt a longing he could not describe nor shake. Later, when he looked back on this day, he could not recall why he said what he did.

Brian said, "Actually, what I need is some fresh air."

"And what I need," said Mr. Rumpled Suit, "is a smoke. Let's get out of here."

The men cradled their coffee as they put up their trays and walked toward the front. When they got to the wings, they carefully stepped around the passengers by the emergency doors, eased open the doors and slipped outside. They walked out on the wings about halfway. Brian watched as the farms below stretched out across like a patchwork quilt. He was a city kid, and there was something about farms that calmed him. The breeze felt good, and he caught the first whiff of a cigarette being lit up. He didn't enjoy being around cigarette smoke but there was something about that first whiff he liked.

"Brian, Brian Mulberry." Brian put out his hand for rumpled suit to shake. "Glad to meet you."

Mr. Rumpled Suit didn't introduce himself. Instead in a quiet, far away voice he said, "I met Jesus yesterday." Brian didn't know how to react, so he watched quietly as the man took a long drag and then flicked the spent match into the wind.

As Rumpled Suit spoke he looked into some far off place in his mind. "Yesterday I was in Mexico City." he said. "I represent a sporting goods and clothing cartel. We commission local mills to make clothes, sports bags, hats, shoes, you name it, and then put our labels on."

He paused and looked over at Brian, making sure his audience of one was still with him. “The retail mark up in the malls? You don’t want to know. Anyway, I finished my last meeting with a textile mill owner. He didn’t want to meet on Sunday morning, something about his daughter and first communion. Like I care. I tell him, ‘My clients pay your salary, and my flight to Dallas leaves at 3 o’clock.’ So we meet at the hotel and he is in a hurry. Okay, I have a heart, so we do business fast and he signs the contract and takes off. We’re finished and I’m hungry. Buddy of mine who travels all the time -- and I mean all the time — had told me about a five star restaurant near my hotel in Mexico City. Caters to tourists so you know the food is clean. I get there about noon, It’s in a real nice part of the city and is packed. Tourists and lawyers out the door. The wait is ridiculous. I pay for five star food, I expect first class treatment. Excuse me, Brian, but with what I make I don’t wait. First class all the way, everyday, or its the highway. Forget this, I say, and walk around the corner. It was like I was in another world.”

Rumpled Suit stopped talking to smoke and look deep within at another world as the plane’s wings cut through wisps of clouds. “I turn the corner,” he said, returning to the story, “and the street is nothing but dirt. There is trash everywhere. I see shacks for miles made of plywood and tin and mud and whatever was left out in the rain. I’m thinking, what is wrong with these people that they live like this? There’s this little cafe with tables on the street. I’m hungry so I sit down. No one is in sight, and I have my choice of seats. The menu is a grimy, greasy sheet of paper written in Spanish. Great. I can’t believe I’m there, and all I can hope for is that I don’t get sick when this short Mexican guy walks over. He is wearing jeans and a clean t-shirt, and carrying a notepad and a pencil. I know he is short because I am sitting and he is standing and he is barely looking down. He smiles and speaks in Spanish but get this -- I heard him in English. He said, ‘*Como esta? Mi nombre es Jesus...*’ What I heard, though, was, ‘Hello, my name is Jesus and I will be your waiter today.’”

Rumpled Suit lit a second cigarette. They were flying over a

lake. Brian waited, wondering where Rumples was taking them. He picked up the thread right where he had left off. “And deep down inside I understood that what he really meant is that he would be my servant, just as I am to be His. His eyes never left mine. A part of me wanted to jump up and shout or to fall at his feet or to hug this sweaty waiter, all at the same time I was so moved. But all I got out was, ‘Coffee, black, with an order of tacos, hold the lettuce, *por favor.*’ Jesus said, ‘Right away, my friend. Oh, would you mind terribly if my friends get served first?’ ‘What friends?’ I asked.”

“I looked around and saw for the first time that there were other people at the cafe. In fact, every table was filled. They were so hungry, and so thirsty, and so ready, and they were hoping, expecting, waiting, looking, not at Jesus but at me. I’m thinking, ‘Stop it stop it stop looking at me I’m not your waiter. Jesus is your waiter! And he is supposed to serve me first ‘cause I was here first, not you!’ but Jesus was talking and I wasn’t listening because I was talking to myself. So what I said out loud was, ‘Pardon me?’ Jesus said, “I know you. You expect others to serve you. When you exalt yourself you end up getting humbled in the worst way. But when you humble yourself by helping other people in my name, when you reach out to neighbors across the street and across town and across the world, you will find one day that you are in the Kingdom of Heaven. We are short handed today. So, my friend, right now I need your assistance. Would you be so kind as to help me pass out these dishes of salsa? Be careful that you don’t spill any on that nice Armani tie.”

Rumples Suit tossed the butt into the wind and watched as it flew off at 600 miles per hour. He said, “When I got to the airport, I looked at my ticket. It read, First Class.”

Brian’s knees felt weak as they made their way back to their seats. He thought about his own beliefs. He wasn’t sure he knew what he believed. Sure, those disciples in the Gospels met and followed a man

named Jesus. He had heard of people meeting Jesus in life after life encounters. But this was different. Rumples Suit was telling Brian that Jesus was here, on earth, now, in 2012. Could Jesus of Nazareth be serving the hungry in the barrios of Mexico City?

When they got to their seats Brian sat down heavily. Rumples Suit headed to the bathroom. Brian dozed again.

When he awoke they were at the gate, and people were getting their luggage down from the overhead compartments. Mama Ain't Happy said, "Ahem!" and waited for him to get up. Mr. Rumples Suit was already gone. Maybe it was all a dream.

Something caught his eye on the empty seat next to him. It was a wrinkled Armani tie with a salsa stain. Brian asked himself, "What do I do now?"

*All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!*