

## ***First Things First***

Mark 9:30-37

September 24, 2006

### **I.**

Today we have another reading from the Gospel of Mark that seems difficult to understand. Last week we were told to deny ourselves and take up our crosses. This week we hear that to be first we must be last, and be the servant of all. To succeed we must serve rather than be served.

Perhaps that's good advice for other people, but for many of us it might be a little hard to accept when it applies to us.

As a way to get into this important gospel reading, let me ask some questions. What do Mother Theresa and Henry Kissinger have in common? Mother Theresa served the poor and needy all her life and probably didn't have two nickels to rub together. Henry Kissinger, on the other hand, for years was one of the most powerful men on earth, and now has a multi-million dollar consulting business and a luxurious home in Washington, D.C., not to mention his other assets. How do they share anything?

The answer is, both won the Nobel Peace Prize. When the competition was concluded and the balloting was over, both were first, not last.

And what about wealthy people who give their money away? Warren Buffet, who is the second richest man in the world, recently gave eighty-five percent of his fortune, which was thirty seven billion dollars, to Bill Gates' charity. The fact that Bill Gates recently was ranked ahead of Warren Buffet as the richest man in the world is intriguing, but the money still went to charity.

Rick Warren is another lesser-known but equally good example. He's the pastor of Saddleback Church in California and has become wealthy beyond anything he ever expected because of his books, *The Purpose Driven Life* and *The Purpose Driven Church*, and the ministries they have produced. He has committed to a "reverse tithe" where he gives ninety percent to the church and keeps ten percent.

Of course, when you consider the money that Warren Buffet and Rick Warren still keep for themselves, they aren't exactly riches to rags stories. Even ten percent of several million is a lot. Nevertheless, these examples can set the stage for understanding today's gospel.

### **II.**

The reading you just heard from Mark describes one more in a series of significant events in Jesus' ministry. In prior readings we heard Peter acknowledge Jesus as Messiah. We read about Jesus' transfiguration on a mountain where God spoke to the disciples out of a cloud. Today, Jesus told them that he would be delivered into the hands of men and killed.

And what were the disciples doing during this time? They were thinking about themselves, arguing over who was the greatest. They likely still thought that Jesus was planning on driving the Romans out of Palestine and restoring the nation of Israel. As in political campaigns, they probably thought they were going to be the next cabinet, and perhaps they already were arguing about who was going to get what job in the new Administration.

They might have thought that following Jesus was enhancing their prestige. Perhaps they thought they no longer were going to be fishermen, or farmers, or would have to work at other menial tasks. They were on the way to Jerusalem with Jesus for something big. They didn't fully understand what it was, but they knew that things were going to change.

And at this point, I would like to digress a little in defense of the disciples. In many gospel stories the disciples are portrayed as being thickheaded, and as being slow to grasp the things Jesus was saying. To some extent this is a bad rap laid upon them by people who had the benefit of hindsight.

The disciples, however, were there at the beginning, when the foundations of Christianity were being revealed. And Jesus' ministry was unlike anything the world had ever seen. In my view it is not surprising that they did not fully grasp the meaning of all they were witnessing.

### **III.**

Today's reading is a good example of the confusion that confronted the disciples. As to be expected, they were thinking in terms of the world's standards, but Jesus was talking about God's standards. They were thinking of earthly things, while Jesus was speaking of spiritual things. They were concerned about their own reality, but Jesus' was describing his reality.

He told them that if they wanted to be first they must be last and the servant of all. And he used a child as an example to drive home the point that even someone with no status or significance whatsoever still is equal in God's kingdom.

In this sense, Jesus' reference to children might be misunderstood in a modern context. Today we exalt childhood, and look upon it as a privileged time when we teach our children, and guide them in experiencing life. We try hard to show them that they are important parts of our families and have identities within society.

It was entirely different in Jesus' time. Children had no status at all, and were socially invisible. They were to stay with their mothers until they could become useful. Children at most were regarded as a source of free labor, and basically were nonpersons.

So, taking the two statements together, Jesus told the disciples that what it takes to be great in the world is just the opposite of what it takes to be great in God's kingdom. They had to set aside their own ambitions, and their worldly ideas of power and authority, and instead focus on serving God's people. And the example of a child was meant to show that helping God's people required them to help people who could not do any thing for them in return.

Jesus' message to the disciples was that in order to be his representatives in the world, in order to go out and teach, and baptize, and make disciples of others as they soon would be called to do, they had to give up their own pretensions of self-importance, self-reliance, and ambition. They would have to follow Jesus' model of humility and become servants of all.

### **IV.**

It is important to note, however, that Jesus did not tell the disciples that they should not seek success. He did not criticize accomplishment. He did not condemn ambition or a desire to achieve. Instead, he simply redefined these concepts.

How does that definition apply to us today? How are we to understand that to be first we must be last? For openers, let's look at the gospel from two perspectives.

First, it would be a mistake to engage in simplistic moralizing about the choices that appear in the surface. At a superficial level, it is possible to say there are two choices; first and last, black and white. And then it is possible to say that one choice leads to the world and separation from God, and the other choice leads to God and eternal life.

It is easy sometimes to look at Scriptures that seem to offer a simple choice, and just go down the list and check the boxes. If we check the right boxes we're in and if not we're out.

The problem with looking at things in such a black and white way is that we live in a technicolor world. Sometimes we can come up with some really strange results if we are too literal and do not consider the context in which Jesus said what he said. Our Gospel reading next week about cutting off your hand or plucking our your eye is a clear example of this. So, there are times when we just have to step back and figure out what Jesus really meant.

Obviously, for us today, there is more involved here than people arguing among themselves as to who is the greatest. We know instinctively that it would be the height of pride and arrogance to make such a claim today. Tooting your own horn is generally considered rude, disrespectful, ill-mannered, uncool. And we don't need religious instruction to realize that. Even atheists could agree that such behavior is not a model to be followed.

As a result, we can conclude that Jesus did not literally mean that we must be last as that term is commonly understood in today's vernacular. So what did he mean? What was the first century understanding of that term?

This leads to the second perspective we should consider. What if we go to an LSU or Ole Miss football game and hear people shouting "We're number one!?" Would Jesus criticize that? Would he say that in order to be a good football team you must be last? Of course not.

In the same way, Olympic athletes train rigorously for years for the momentary privilege of standing on the top platform and receiving medals that proclaims they are, in fact, the greatest. Is this what Jesus was condemning when he spoke to the disciples? No, I don't think so.

When a student takes a college admissions test, the idea is to score as high as possible; to get a better grade than others taking the test. Even in seminary there was pressure and competition to get good grades. No one wanted to be last in the class.

I think we have to realize that Jesus was talking about a different kind of first, and a different kind of last. Jesus was not saying that we should not try to be successful, or that we should not try to provide comfortable lives for our families.

In the same way, Jesus does not condemn the basic human desire to accomplish, or to receive the respect of our peers, or to work to achieve something that will leave a mark on the world. Go back to my earlier example of Henry Kissinger and Mother Theresa and that point becomes more apparent.

And I can think of two more examples that illustrate the contrast between being first in the wrong way, which Jesus criticized, and being first in a different way of which he would approve.

The first is Paris Hilton. You probably have read about her in the celebrity magazines or have seen TV coverage on shows like *Access Hollywood*. Here is someone who became famous simply because she already was famous. She is someone who is a celebrity for being a celebrity. She didn't have to do anything, or believe in anything, or contribute anything to society. She just had to "be." This is the kind of trying to be first that Jesus would find inconsistent with serving in God's kingdom.

The other example is Dr. Jonas Salk. And by way of explanation I will tell you that as a little boy I had three fears. One was that my parents would be killed in an automobile accident and I would be an orphan. The second was that I would be blown up by a Russian atomic bomb. And the third was that I would get polio and have to spend the rest of my life in an iron lung.

Well, Dr. Jonas Salk invented the polio vaccine, and almost overnight my fear was gone. For me, he was the greatest. He was number one. He was first, not last.

This is the kind of ordering of priorities that Jesus had in mind. It is the kind of ordering of priorities that is described in the New Testament reading from James 3:16 we heard today James said "for where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy."

So, when we understand what Jesus meant by being first and last, we see that we are not called to give up our normal desires to be happy, or our ambitions, or our hopes to be successful. We are just called to place them in a godly perspective, and then to act accordingly.

God wants us to be happy. He has given us our lives as his gift, and he wants us to make something good of ourselves. And to do that, we are expected to give back, to place ourselves in service to others, and to share from the blessings we have received.

## **v.**

Today is Mission Sunday. You have in your service bulletins some suggestions about ways to help the church do what today's gospel calls us to do. Some of us are in a position to participate in mission and ministry now, and some of us will be in better positions to do so later.

The bottom line, however, is that if we always focus on ourselves, if our priorities are only ourselves and making ourselves first, then we truly will miss the blessing of serving others.

If, however, we do put others first, then we live into today's gospel. Being last in this sense means putting others ahead of ourselves. If we look for guidance from the Holy Spirit, and if we prayerfully consider how we are called to live our lives, we will find peace and success.

Doing things God's way rather than our way is the crux of today's lesson. If we honor that, we will indeed be first because we have chosen to serve others. And we will find that God's goodness and love will do more for us that we could ever do for ourselves. *Amen.*