

First Things First

Mark 9:30-37

September 23, 2012

I.

Most of you probably can recall news stories about people being awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom at a White House ceremony. That medal, along with the Congressional Gold Medal, are the highest awards that the United States can bestow upon civilians.

And the people who received those Medals of Freedom all had some things in common. They were among the greatest at what they did. They were first, not last. And these awards usually were just one more on a long list of honors they already had received for their success.

So what about that? Did we just hear a gospel reading that spoke of a different approach? On the surface, Jesus seemed to reject the virtues of greatness, success, and being first, didn't he? Would this lead us to think that he would not have approved of what those Medal of Freedom winners did in order to be among the best in their fields?

Sometimes Jesus' teachings in the Bible are either black or white, so to speak. Some things, for example, are either good or evil. There is no middle ground. We also are to love God and our neighbors. It is not optional. And we believe Jesus died for our sins, or we do not. There is no "maybe" about his sacrifice.

But everything Jesus said is not to be taken literally. In next week's gospel, for example, we will hear him say that if our hand causes us to sin, we should cut it off, and if our eye causes us to sin, we should pluck it out. No one seriously believes, however, that Jesus was advocating self-mutilation.

And so, Jesus' words cannot always be viewed as either black or white. Sometimes he spoke in technicolor. There can be shades of difference and subtleties of meaning beneath the surface. It is a common characteristic of many of his teachings.

II.

With that background, let's look further at today's Gospel. Jesus and his disciples were walking along, and he was telling them that he would be delivered into the hands of his persecutors, that they would kill him, and that after three days he would rise again.

That would appear to be pretty serious stuff, wouldn't it? You would think that the disciples would be giving him their full attention. It was the beginning of the end for Jesus, and his words about impending death could lead the disciples to listen in silence and solemnity.

Is that what they were doing? Not hardly. They were totally distracted, and Jesus knew it because later he asked them what they were doing while he was speaking. But everyone looked at their feet and no one answered. Caught! Busted! Someone finally admitted that they were arguing about which of them was the greatest.

So Jesus called them together and said, "If any one would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." And then he picked up a child in the crowd and said, "Whoever receives such a child receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me."

III.

How do we understand these teachings? Let's begin with the disciples' incriminating admission that they weren't even listening to Jesus, but talking among themselves about their own glory.

They still did not understand Jesus' real mission to the world. Perhaps they continued to hope that Jesus would drive the Romans out of Palestine and restore the nation of Israel, and they were going to be part of it.

This reminds me of some political campaigns when I worked in Washington, D.C. Even before the elections, people working on campaign staffs frequently speculated about what kind of government jobs they would have when their candidates were elected. It probably is going on in campaigns right now, and perhaps the disciples were doing the same thing.

Or they might have thought that following Jesus was enhancing their prestige. After all, they now were high visibility people. The crowds and the excitement of Jesus' miracles must have been exhilarating. Perhaps they thought their days as fishermen and farmers and shopkeepers were over. They were going to Jerusalem with Jesus for something big.

Try to visualize the same thing in a contemporary setting. The Saints play Kansas City this afternoon. And imagine the locker room just before game time. The players are dressed, and the coaches are giving their final instructions.

But what if the players weren't listening? What if they started arguing among themselves about who was the greatest? What if they began to disagree on who contributed the most to the offense or defense, or who was going to be the player of the game?

We probably would think the coaches should give them all a stern talking to so that they could focus on what's really important.

IV.

That's what Jesus did. He brought the disciples up short and said those who would be first must be last, and the servant of all. But what does that mean? It's important to note that Jesus did not tell them they should not seek success. He did not criticize accomplishment or condemn ambition or a desire to achieve.

For example, what if we go to a college 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 proclaim they are, in fact, the greatest. I do not believe Jesus was condemning that when he spoke to the disciples.

And when a student takes a college admissions test, the idea is to score as high as possible. Even in seminary there was pressure and competition to get good grades. No one wanted to be last in the class.

So Jesus was talking about a different kind of first, and a different kind of last. He was telling the disciples that what it takes to be great in God's kingdom is different from what it takes to be great in the world. They could not put their own personal success and authority first, but rather were called to serve God's people first.

And how does the child fit into this? Today we regard childhood as an important time when we teach our children and guide them in experiencing life. We try to show them that they are important parts of our families and have identities within society.

It was different in Jesus' time. Children had no status at all, and no role in society. They had to stay with their mothers until they could become useful. Children at most were treated as sources of free labor, and were not symbols of anything important. Yet Jesus identified with a child.

That's probably because adults, now and then, struggle to avoid the temptations of the world. Children, however, are more likely to be pure and innocent, at least for a while. During those early years they will not yet have developed the ulterior motives or hidden agendas that we sometimes see in ourselves, and that can lead us away from what our Lord wants us to be.

And although not explicit in this reading, we also can note that Jesus' use of a child to describe entry into heaven also parallels his teachings about being born in the spirit, which occurs when we accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior.

That's when our belief takes root, the Holy Spirit shows forth through us in our lives and, to use the well-known metaphor, we are born again; not physically, but spiritually. Thus we become spiritual children and begin our growth in the Lord, and through subsequent spiritual maturity we prepare for the kingdom of heaven that Jesus described today.

V.

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

And when we do that, then we live into today's gospel. Being last in this sense means not putting ourselves first. It means thinking of others in the same way as we think of ourselves. It is the Golden Rule. "Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Lk. 6:31).

And it isn't that hard. We do it a lot at St. Thomas. It can be a comforting or kind word to someone who is worried or anxious. It's help to those who are ill or infirm, such as we see from our Samaritan Guild. It's our Prayer Ministry. It's care for the needy in the community. And even when we all are healthy and happy, it still means that we extend ourselves to others.

Doing things God's way rather than our way is the crux of today's lesson. We all have natural human tendencies to look at those who have more than we do, and want what they have. Today's gospel, however, calls us to think about those who have less rather than more, those who are suffering when we are not, and to see their needs in the context of our own blessings.

This can lead us to the compassion inherent in Jesus' teaching, and then we will indeed be first because we have chosen to care for others. We will find that God's goodness and love will do more for us than we could ever do for ourselves. *Amen.*