

20 September 2009 Sermon: So You Want To Be The Greatest?

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[Proverbs 31:10-31](#)

[Psalm 1](#)

[James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a](#)

[Mark 9:30-37](#)

So You Want First Place? That is the “title” of this reading in The Message Bible by Eugene Peterson.

Listen to this interpretation as you look at your insert:

³⁰⁻³²Leaving there, they went through Galilee. He didn't want anyone to know their whereabouts, for he wanted to teach his disciples. He told them, "The Son of Man is about to be betrayed to some people who want nothing to do with God. They will murder him. Three days after his murder, he will rise, alive." They didn't know what he was talking about, but were afraid to ask him about it.

³³They came to Capernaum. When he was safe at home, he asked them, "What were you discussing on the road?"

³⁴The silence was deafening—they had been arguing with one another over who among them was greatest.

³⁵He sat down and summoned the Twelve. "So you want first place? Then take the last place. Be the servant of all."

³⁶⁻³⁷He put a child in the middle of the room. Then, cradling the little one in his arms, he said, "Whoever embraces one of these children as I do embraces me, and far more than me—God who sent me."

So you want first place? You want to be the greatest? What an easy question. Of course we want to be first - of course we want to be great- to be someone, to ourselves, to our family, at work, competing on school teams. Who doesn't want to be the greatest?

Face it, to compete in this world, especially in this economy, we have to work harder, smarter, offer more and be better than everyone else with whom we compete. Colleges want our

students to be the top of their class. Recruiters want the best competitors, not the one left on the bench.

But we know when Jesus is asking the question it's kind of a trick question. Because we know the answer is not supposed to be 'Yes, I want to be first'. And Jesus knows that we know it's a trick question; we want to be great - to be something or someone - and yet the way we might want to be the greatest is not necessarily the way Jesus calls us to be the greatest. In fact, with God, to be first, we must be last. As St. Francis frames this truth so beautifully "...we must not seek so much to be consoled as to console; to be understood, as to understand; to be loved, as to love..." In Jesus' terms, we must seek to be the servant not seek out others to serve us.

This is the Christian concept of servant leadership. It is in serving Christ that we lead others to Christ. It is in volunteering that we invite others to join us as volunteers; by serving at church on Sunday we have the authority to ask others to serve on Sunday with us. To be authentic in our service to God and to our neighbors we go out to the vineyards early in the morning and lead others who do not yet know how to serve, or why service might be just what they are wanting in their life, or that service is in fact the life into which God is calling them through us.

Let me be clear; Jesus did not say we need to be subservient, he said we need to be a servant --to put others' needs before our own. And sometimes serving means speaking up for the one who has no voice; bringing into the light the problem that no one wants to speak about; lifting up the cause that creates conflict and animosity and frustration. Serving does not mean hiding or avoiding, having amnesia when convenient, or temporary blindness.

Being a servant leader means exercising power and authority in support of the weak and vulnerable. And Jesus' living example of power is in his strength of knowing his purpose in his earthly life, his relation to God and how he defines sin.

So how do we get what Jesus has? How can we clarify our use of power and authority on behalf of the vulnerable? There are liturgical and theological patterns that The Bible, our Book of Common Prayer and other sacred traditions and stories show us.

The Book of Mark begins with the Transfiguration of Jesus; God claims Jesus as his only son and invests God's authority in Jesus. Jesus then comes down from the literal mountain top experience, he regroups with the community of disciples, and they are immediately called into service on behalf of the man whose son is possessed. Jesus calls the demonic spirit out of the child and the child is made whole. Then the disciples and Jesus retreat for quiet. Mark sets up a pattern that is replicated in our own Sunday worship at least twice; mountaintop experience which is usually a singular experience in which we are fed with God, regrouping as a community and then service to others. There are also quiet times of reflection.

We have the pattern at least twice in our regular service; we are fed with the Word of God. As a deacon, I carry the Gospel book high in the beginning of the service as a symbol of where the word is - it is in the good new of Jesus Christ. This book contains only the Gospel stories - it does not contain the other liturgical readings. At the beginning of the service it is held high and placed in a prominent position as a sign that this is where the good news is. But after it is read, it is no longer held high. You can see this more clearly when we have a Gospel procession, but the book is to be returned to the altar while held at heart height-- again as a sign that the good news no longer resides in the book but is in our hearts. After the Gospel and its interpretation, we re-gather as a community to recite the creed which we share as a faith, and then we are immediately called into service through praying for others. (By the way that quiet time of reflection is throughout our Sunday liturgy and why I take time for quiet before the general confession. It is also why I want us to slow down our corporate reading of that prayer.)

The liturgy of the table is a similar pattern; we are fed with the body and blood of God -the body of Christ, the bread of Heaven - one can't have much more of a mountain top experience than

that!—and this is a unique and personal experience. We re-gather as a community to give thanks together, and we are invited out into the world to serve others in the name of Christ.

Investment of authority (also known as the mountain top experience), regathering as a community and service. Jesus receives his reviving, central authority from God, gathers with his community and goes into service of the weak and powerless.

For us to truly live in this pattern, we must empty ourselves of ourselves. God cannot fill us up if we are so full of ourselves that there is no room. This is the “trick” part of the question; to be first, greatest, best, we must willingly and consciously empty ourselves of ourselves and invite God to fill us with God’s authority, power and joy. In other words, we must be empty, deflated, retracted, small, lowly....willing to be a child-like servant to the divine will of the most Loving One.

Although sometimes we feel incapable of leading the most vulnerable, all of us child-like servants gathered here today are the most powerful people on earth at this moment. We know where to go when we feel lost and helpless - we go to church. We know where to go when we feel dirty or unworthy - we go to church. We know where to go when we have turned our lives into soap operas by making everyone else’s problems all about us - we go to church. Because church is the haven for broken, searching, sinful sheep. If we can’t come to church looking bad and feeling bad then we have desecrated this place of ultimate amnesty and forgiveness.

But as Episcopalians we also have the most powerful tool in the world; not money and pedigree and education and connections but the ability to pray. First, last, and in-between, we can pray. Whether the prayer is Christ Help Me!, the Serenity Prayer, the Lord’s Prayer or the Desiderata it truly doesn’t matter. Whether it is in our heart, out loud, in Spanish or Hindi - it doesn’t matter. By prayer we change. The act of praying changes us - not God - but us. And prayer is the entrance gate or pathway to servanthood. ‘Thy will be done’ is the servant’s prayer. ‘My will be done’ is the prayer of the lost, the overfed, the slave owner.

Mahatma Gandhi, in one of his last notes left behind in 1948, wrote this;

“I will give you a talisman. Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and weakest person whom you may have seen, and ask yourself, if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him or her. Will s/he gain anything by it? Will it restore him/her to a control over her/his own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to swaraj (freedom) for the hungry and spiritually starving millions? Then you will find your doubts and your self melt away.”

Mother Teresa says the same thing this way:

“In God we live and move and have our being. It is God who gives life to all, who gives power and being to all that exists. But for His sustaining presence, all things would cease to be and fall back into nothingness. Consider that you are in God, surrounded by God and encompassed in God, swimming in God. Be sincere in your prayer. Do you know how to pray? Do you pray your prayers? Do you love to pray? When we come face to face with God we cannot but be sincere and know ourselves - that we are nothing. It is only when we realize our nothingness, our emptiness, that God can fill us with himself. When we become full of God we will do all our work well.”

Mother began her work taking a basket full of bread out into the streets to feed hungry people. Someone told her, “Mother, that isn’t enough bread for so many hungry people.” She responded, “I’ll do what I can.”

When the shopkeepers saw what she was doing, they brought her bread to refill her empty basket. Mother acted first, doing a small thing she could control, and others continue to follow her into the vineyards.

May we all go forth this week swimming in love of God, exercising our God-given power on behalf of the vulnerable.

