

## Morning Worship Services

Sunday, March 15, 2009

### Face to Face: Slander and Gentleness “*Serving All*”

Mark 9:33-41

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In Mark 8:31 and 9:31, Jesus predicted his death. On both occasions, it created fear, confusion and resistance. The disciples could not envision the Messiah dying. That was the last thing a Messiah would do, particularly without first restoring the Jews to their rightful place of authority and governance. By all accounts, they were the chosen people. At least Jesus should establish the reign of the Jews first.

First things first, who can argue with that? It is the essence of Stephen Covey’s book of the same name, *First Things First*. Covey claims that his organizing process will help you categorize tasks so you focus on what is important, not merely what is urgent. Covey claims that getting first things first will help create balance between personal and professional responsibilities.

The essence of this conventional wisdom should be obvious, correct? Jesus is anything but conventional. Would Jesus agree with Stephen Covey and his premise of first things first? No, it’s last things first. In fact what we may see as first priorities, Jesus might view as last. Jesus tells us to stop, turn around and look at life from a different angle. High is low. Up is down. Top is bottom. First is last. Last is first. Jesus reframes Covey.

In the text, Jesus communicates how the kingdom of God really works. Jesus gives us a key spiritual principle today: embracing the last makes us first. The key mark of discipleship is servanthood. The text teaches that discipleship grows first by a downward, lowly movement, as a tree seeking roots, in order then to reach skyward. Be ready to receive the lowly neighbor as if sent by Christ. The disciplines of humility are most pertinent to those most prone to vanity. Childlike innocence is characteristic of those who dwell in the kingdom of God. Chrysostom writes, “If you are in love with precedence and the highest honor, pursue the things in last place, pursue being the least valued of all, pursue being the lowliest of all, pursue being the smallest of all, pursue placing yourselves behind others.”<sup>1</sup> To be first or great has nothing to do with powers to heal or exorcise; it has to do with service and humility.

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<sup>1</sup>Chrysostom, *The Gospel of St. Matthew, Homily 58*.

The disciples were to adopt Jesus’ values and perspectives if they were to be important in God’s kingdom. They had just begun to realize what following Jesus really entailed.

In verses 33-37, the action builds by two stages to the climactic saying of the unit. “Capernaum” brings Jesus and his disciples back home; “in the house” alerts the reader to watch for special instruction to the disciples. Jesus probes what the disciples had been discussing. The word “discuss” implies private conversations not intended to be overheard. The disciples were perplexed by Jesus’ denial of self<sup>2</sup> and their own self-aggrandizement as they had argued about their greatness. Questions of precedence and rank were constantly arising in the culture of first century Palestine. At meals there was concern about where to sit, who was served first and who drank first out of the sometimes one cup available. The message of Jesus was liberating, thus the challenge to society’s definition of greatness was now becoming accessible to the poor, oppressed and common man. The question of rank was usually in the background of all discussions.

Jesus sat down and called his twelve disciples to join him. He gave the disciples a paradox of the true spiritual nature of being a follower of Jesus: “If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.” Notice that not only does Jesus turn their understanding of greatness, and ours too, on its head, but he added a little extra. Not only do we have to be last to be first, but we have to be a servant, a servant of all. Our preoccupation cannot be ourselves, but others. Our mission is to be disciples ourselves, but also to make disciples. We are to be more concerned about others knowing Jesus than our own needs, wants and desires. To be truly missional we must put others first and ourselves last. What a paradox. What a switch. The church is not a club; it is a sending agency to change the world.

Jesus then took a little child and had the child stand in their midst. The word that Jesus uses for child is of Aramaic origin and this word can be translated as both child and servant. So here Jesus is using a real life example that parallels exactly what he just taught in verse 35. Children were not viewed as full persons in society. In many cases children were treated like property. Jesus didn’t tell the disciples be a child, but to welcome children. Jesus is teaching on greatness in the kingdom of God. Jesus isn’t saying that we say to every child we see, “Welcome in the name of Jesus”. He is using the example of a child to show that the way to be last is to welcome those who are viewed as last in the name of Jesus. By being last, you will be first. To measure greatness by lowly service is apparently as characteristic of Jesus as it is alien to the world of every age. Jesus does not despise the desire to be

first, but his definition of greatness stands the world’s ordering of priorities on its head. It radically challenges a fundamental human assumption about achievement.

Any welcome extended in the name of Jesus, is a welcome offered to Jesus. The disciples did not welcome in their name; they welcomed in Jesus’ name. We do not welcome in our name; we welcome in Jesus name. In other words, it is not who we are or how great we are that makes this welcome powerful. It is the name of the one in whom we welcome that makes the welcome powerful. The smaller we become, the more we get out of the way. The more we strive to be last, the greater Jesus becomes in our life. By acting in this way, even though we are last, we are first, because the overwhelming power of Jesus in our life makes us first. By being last I become greater, because this places Jesus first.

To be great in the kingdom, we must use the authority of Jesus not our own. Our authority will get us nowhere in the kingdom of God. Whoever receives in my name, receives me. Therefore, that person receives the Father and the Holy Spirit. The least becomes the greatest by this effect of reception. The authority of Jesus makes even the least, the greatest. The word used in verse 37 for “welcome” describes a person who is a hostess, like at a restaurant or a hotel. Jesus is not describing an act of friendliness or a person who is kind. Jesus is describing someone who is willing to serve others regardless of who they are or what they may get from it. We usually don’t have a problem with serving others, if we get something out of it – paycheck, kudos, a good reputation, just having a thank you card would be nice. If we want to be great in the kingdom of God, then we help those who cannot help us. We do things for those who probably will never say thanks. We act in a way that there is no way others can return a favor.

As Jesus was teaching, John interrupted with a seemingly random thought. Notice verse 38. “Teacher,” said John, “we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.” This morning’s text, in its entirety, is about who is the greatest in the kingdom of God. Verses 38-41 are no exception. This statement by John shows the disciples misconception of the nature of the kingdom of God. They think in terms of culture. Jesus thinks in terms of the Spirit.

The phrase “we told him to stop” is in the imperfect tense; that is past action with ongoing impact. The disciples demanded the man to stop and he blew them off. The point here surrounds the issue of who is the greatest. The disciples were upset that this man was acting without proper authorization; it was a matter of greatness. The

disciples felt only they were authorized; they were the chosen twelve. Jesus' remark in verse 39, contrasts the disciples' lack of power with the man who had power. He stressed that the use of Jesus name must mean recognition of his authority. We saw in Mark 9:18 that the disciples could not do an exorcism, but this man could. So who is authorized? The episode of the exorcist compliments the earlier story of the disciples' discussion of who the greatest is. In the earlier episode, the disciples were taught that to be first one must be last and a servant to others. If they embraced this attitude, then they could hardly have feelings of jealousy and rivalry for someone else through whom God is at work.

How do we participate in this new understanding of being first? Jesus says, "I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward." Here Jesus shows the extent of the participation needed. There are no distinctions between trivial and important tasks. Like a welcome in Jesus name, a cup of water given in Jesus name, places us last so that Jesus becomes greater. Jesus' authority makes even the most trivial of tasks great. Citing Augustine, "Some who are intent on severe disciplinary principles which admonish us to rebuke the restless, not to give what is holy to dogs, to consider a despiser of the church as a heathen, to cut off from the unified structure of the body the member which causes scandal, so disturb the peace of the church that they try to separate the wheat from the chaff before the proper time. Blinded by this error, they are themselves separated instead from the unity of Christ."<sup>3</sup>

Needs vary. Some are rich and others poor. Some have all their wants supplied and others have few of their needs met. We have a responsibility within the body to care for one another. We also have a responsibility to care for those who are last in society. Is it too radical to assume that no one should be naked, thirsty or hungry as long as the body of Christ has an accurate understanding of the last being first, thus truly being missional followers and a church?

Slander is an untruthful spoken statement about a person that harms one's reputation or standing in the community. Gentleness, as an approach to handling life's challenges, is a forgotten virtue. How does misunderstanding that the first shall be last and the last shall be first slander God and our fellow man?

First is last. Last is first. When we go from first to last it never feels good; but it is always worth it. When I

become less, Jesus becomes greater. And so it is for you. To be and make disciples requires an ongoing face to face encounter with Jesus. The first become last. The last become first. Jesus became last for us to be first. We become last for Jesus to be first. Let us pray!

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<sup>3</sup>Augustine, *Faith and Works* 4.6.