

Pick me! Pick me!

James 3: 16-4:6, Mark 9:30-37

Slide: Hello, I'm better...

Who here wants to be first?

Who here wants to be powerful?

Who here wants to be greatest?

I'm going to guess that most of us would probably avoid answering "yes" to these questions. After all, we are taught as children to have humility, to share, and to not grab for the best, and indeed much of the Bible does indeed speak to the least of those, those who are last as being of primary concern to God. The Gospel reading we just heard is no exception to this. It goes to say that even if we want to be first, powerful, or great, as those disciples seemed to argue about being, we more than likely would never admit it or at least we try our best to put forward a piece of that humble pie.

So, I'm going for broke here. I'm going to admit it up front. It feels great to be first. It feels awesome to have power. And, maybe I want to

be greatest. Now don't worry. Let me preface this by telling you about an observation I had at our amazing St. John's Preschool.

Slide: SJPS

As the preschoolers gather to go outside, they line up, and when asked, "Ok, who is first in line," each and every preschooler raises their hand saying, "Pick me! I want to be first." The same goes for in the classroom when asking for a volunteer to serve snack. "Me, me, pick me! I want to do it!" Mrs. Meier, I have observed, has a wonderful way of giving her students each a turn to be first to do something. Each of them gets a turn. Everyone gets a chance to be first.

The children are eager to be first. They want to be a part of what is going on and they are excited about it when they are picked. Yet, adults are not as likely to admit that they want to be first. In fact, we are often hard pressed to admit that we have aspirations to be greatest or first of all or at least, most of us do. Instead, along the way, it's likely that we have

learned that we should want to be last, to not seek power and to be servants. Humility, although it is an amazing practice that is a benefit, sometimes we force ourselves into false humility to get something. Of course, not always, but it's true about ourselves. And, we can feel guilty for wanting influence and we don't want to seem pushy, selfish, or immodest – all good things.

Slide: Who is the Greatest?

But, this sometimes translates into society as being something that is not too good, because when people do aspire to a position of leadership when they should and have the gifts to do so, these days it can be highly criticized, even when that leadership is helpful. It's Ok for preschoolers to want to be a Senator or President, but perhaps you have noticed that the moment adults run for office, suddenly motivations are challenged.

People who seek leadership positions are often placed under scrutiny. Did these leaders actually enter

those positions for the wrong reasons or along the way, forget the very humble beginning they may have had? I hope that we all know there are leaders who have the best motives for being in leadership, who along the way, find their motives challenged when they needn't be. It's a tricky thing trusting in leaders and in those who seek leadership today. And, it's a tricky thing to be a leader.

And yet, I assure you this is not a new thing. We hear it in the New Testament reading for today from James:

Slide: Wisdom

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish.

Too often we have seen power used to increase personal

wealth and to protect the powerful while the poor not only become poorer, they are blamed for their poverty. This is the primary concern that James has for his church throughout his entire letter to them. In fact, if you read the whole book of James, he ties in leadership, gossip and inaction along with all that.

Slide: If any want...

And, in today's Gospel reading from Mark, we can see the concern Jesus has regarding the desire and the enticement power and greatness has on each of us. After all, I think it's rather an innate human tendency to strive for greatness, to be admired even though we are taught not to seek it. In fact, Jesus even seems to say that like a child who is vulnerable and in that ancient world was last and was least that we should instead strive to be those attributes.

*But, who here wants to be last?
Who here wants to be powerless?
Who here wants to be the least?
Who here wants to grow a community of doormats?*

Again, I think the answer is no one. No one wants to be weak or last. And, I'm not sure Jesus is saying that we need to be disenfranchised. Perhaps, we should simply be honest and say that very few of us aspire to humbleness because while we might be willing to start at the bottom, we most certainly would not want to stay there; at least I can't think of anyone who would choose downward mobility on purpose.

And, so, we are left with a dilemma. How can we reconcile our desire to have the power to affect change in the world for good, with our suspicion of power being bad?

Slide: Man with child

Let us take another look at the Gospel reading from today. Certainly one way to read this is to see that Jesus is telling his disciples that they ought not to desire to be great, and then he uses a child as an example of servanthood. A child is unable to speak for herself and has no power. A child is completely vulnerable.

So, are we to be like a child?
I'm going to go for broke here
and say that I don't think this is
what Jesus is saying.

Look at it in context. Just before this passage in the bible, Jesus has just told his disciples that he is to suffer and die at the hands of others. Then, when on their next journey together, he tells them again that he, the Son of Humanity, must be betrayed and killed, which is not exactly a powerful deed at all. After that, Jesus discerns that the disciples are arguing about being greatest. Obviously, his disciples are not looking too good by this time. They don't get what Jesus is telling them. The power Jesus chooses to use verses the power the disciples want to use are in direct contrast.

Slide: Helpers climbing

Yet, there is more in this passage from Mark's Gospel. Notice that Jesus doesn't actually say that being the greatest is bad. In fact, he does not say to them, "Whoever wants to be first is a bad person, is greedy, power-hungry and corrupt." Rather, it

is a teachable moment about how to be a good leader. It is about how to use power well. He offers guidance for anyone "who wants to be first", and most definitely, we know that the disciples found themselves in those places of leadership after Christ's ascension into Heaven.

Jesus doesn't even comment on the disciple's desire to be first. Jesus knows our human desires to be liked, loved, and praised. Here he even uses the language of "If any of you WANT to be first," suggesting that he knows there will be people who desire this. And yet, he also doesn't say that one should be poor, abused, and disenfranchised either.

Slide: Blank

Many people have understood this passage in the bible as advocating abuse, either psychological or physical, as scripture is often used against those who are the most vulnerable in our society. This scripture historically has been used to tell women that it is God's will that they continue

to endure battering and abuse, that somehow Jesus is saying that like this child who is silent and weak, you should be just as vulnerable and submissive as a child. We ought to be careful about this, both men and women.

So, what is Jesus advocating here? I think what Jesus is talking about is this: If you want to be leaders for change in this world, if you strive to be best at something, if you want to be trusted, to ensure your own ethical standards are not compromised, then you must put your own interests for your ego last. There is nothing wrong with having your own voice heard, but it must be heard in consensus and with regard to the neighbor around you whom you are called to love.

Slide: Welcome

In other words, to be a good leader, you must first be a servant to those you lead, to the poor and to the rich, to women and to men, to Jew as well as to Greek, to children as well as adults.

And, Jesus uses a child as an example of this. He holds a child to illustrate what he means about the exercise of power. For, a truly great leader, the most powerful one of a community will embrace children. They will receive a child, not as a dependent or an obligation, but as one who has hospitality and openness to others. Because, Jesus says that in welcoming anyone in his name, especially the least powerful in society, which would be children, you welcome Jesus. And when you welcome Jesus, you welcome the one who sent him, the Almighty God.

Slide: Preschool

So, like the preschool children at St. John's Christian Preschool here at church, it's OK to be "first". We must have leaders in this world and there are people who will have power in the world. The difference is that the ones who are first must also recognize that they have the burden to welcome into the community everyone, and allow everyone to be heard as if each person were Christ himself. For, if we

believe the possibility that we see that everyone could be Jesus, we then see that a leader can make a change for good, in the name of Christ.

Jesus said: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." Let us strive here at St. John's to be that hospitable place, whether first or last. Amen.