

On Being First

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

Slide: “whoever wants..”

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 adults would probably avoid answering “yes” to these questions. After all, most of us were taught as children not to say to jump in line ahead of people, and much of the Bible points to the least of those as being a more important character trait, those who are last, not first. The Gospel we just heard is no exception to this rule. It goes to say that even if we want to be first, powerful, or great, we most likely would never admit it or at least we may not always be honest with ourselves about putting ourselves first.

So, I’m going for broke here. I admit it. I want to be first. I want to be powerful. I want to be greatest!

Slide: VBS picture

Now don’t worry. Let me preface this by telling you about

observations I have made over the years of the first week of St. John’s preschool as they finished up their first full week.

As the preschoolers gather to go outside in the beautiful Autumn weather, they line up, and when asked, “Ok, who is first in line,” each and every preschooler raises their hand saying, “Me, me! I want to be first.” The same goes for in the classroom when asking for a volunteer to do something. “Me, me, pick me! I want to do it!”

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. Instead, along the way, most of us have learned that we should want to be last, to be powerless, and to be servants. We may feel embarrassed for wanting influence and we don’t want to seem pushy, selfish, or immodest...and that is good.

But, this sometimes translates into society as being something that is not too good, because when people do aspire to a position of leadership, it can be

highly criticized, even when that leadership is helpful and good. It's Ok for preschoolers to want to be President, but it doesn't always seem to be OK for adults to say they want to be President. People who seek leadership positions these days are often suspect, and for good reason, for many leaders often now these days enter into leadership positions for very wrong reasons. Yet, there are others who have the best motives for being in leadership, and they find great difficulty in having their authority challenged when it needn't be.

Perhaps we adults are so suspect of leaders because leaders often have the power to hurt people. We hear it in the New Testament reading for today from James:

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.

Slide: Quilt Sunday

Too often we have seen power used to increase personal wealth and to protect the powerful while the poor becomes poorer. We are at a crossroads now in our own culture on this. So, we can see the concern Jesus has regarding this desire to be first. Therefore, who would want to be first and admit it? At least one way to interpret this saying from Jesus is to show that people shouldn't want to be leaders at all.

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 disenfranchised, poor, weak people?

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 certainly we would not want to be

people who would choose to not make ends meet on purpose.

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

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 desire to be great, and then uses a child as an example of servanthood. A child is unable to speak for itself and has no power. So, are we to be like a child? No, 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 needs to die and suffer at the hands of others. Then, when on their next journey together, he tells them again that he, the Son of Man, 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 at the time. They don't get what Jesus is telling them. The power Jesus

chooses to use versus the power the disciples seem to want to use are in contrast.

Yet, there is more in this passage from Mark's Gospel. Notice that Jesus doesn't actually say that being great is a bad thing. Everyone wants to be great at what they do in life! 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 best at something and most definitely, we know that the disciples found themselves in those places of leadership after Christ's Resurrection and Ascension. Indeed, the price of that leadership was very high.

Jesus doesn't even comment on the disciple's desire to be first. Our Lord knows that self-serving action is a human desire. He also doesn't say that you should be poor, abused, and disenfranchised either. Jesus most certainly is not advocating that we all be doormats.

What I do think Jesus is talking about is this: If you want to be leaders of any kind for change in this world, if you want

to be great at that, if you want to be trusted, to ensure your own ethical standards are not compromised, then you must put your serving heart first before doing just whatever you want because you want to. There is nothing wrong with having your own voice heard, but it must be heard in consensus and with regard to other voices around you. Being greatest includes others at the table.

Slide: 5th Grade Confirmation

This week, 5th grade confirmation began. There are 9 amazing kids in that group this year. Clearly, there are a lot of leaders in this group that want to make a difference. Several of them have already volunteered to serve as Sunday School leaders!

At the start of the class, we did a little getting to know you activity. I asked each person to introduce themselves and then say one good thing that they want to happen in the world. I explained that it should be one GOOD thing they want to see happen in the world not something for them or their lives. Here are some of the things they wished for the world:

- That all people would have a home

- That everyone had enough food to eat
- That people would be kinder to each other
- That Covid 19 would be over
- That the world God made would be respected

WOW. These kids have serving hearts. But, clearly they also see food insecurity, homelessness, Covid 19, destruction of the environment, and that people are not kind to each other. These 5th graders clearly have some deep and very mature concerns looking around the world around them. They are leaders already. Look out! Clearly, they see injustice around them they want changed.

I truly believe that Jesus and James both are saying some very valuable reminders about how our leaders today are or are not responding to the world with their power: that to be a good leader, whether that be a small group or a small country, you must first be a servant to those you lead, to the poor and to the rich, to women as well as to men, to Jew as well as to Greek, to children as well as adults.

And, Jesus uses a child as an example of how we are to do

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 care about children, not just their own but all children. They will receive a child, not as a dependent or an obligation, but as someone they can include in the world. 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 encounter the living God.

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. The difference is that the ones who do have some power, and in our own way, that's all of us as the ones who make a difference in this community and the world, we must also recognize that we have the responsibility to welcome everyone into the beloved community, 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.

Slide: 4 year old Bible Milestone

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." Amen.