

Mark 9:30-37

Last of All

Everyday I check online headlines just to see what is trending. For a couple of days this past week there was a message from the Pope to the mafia in Sicily. What he said was, "Stop thinking about yourselves and your money." Now that was a pastor speaking to his flock. Anyway it is a good message for all of us, so I thought I might lead with it this morning.

From time to time another little phrase comes to mind that is helpful to remember when I am trying to make sense of things. Leaders follow! There is a simple truth to this statement. It has a negative implication, that leaders are not really leaders at all; that they go where they are told to go, do what they are told to do.

We struggle with this in a democratic state. On the one hand, we expect leaders to do what they were elected to do, keep their promises. On the other hand, we recognize that we do not have adequate information about various situations and must trust them to become better informed and lead us, even if it means in directions we don't think we want.

In an autocratic form of government, leaders can only do what they want until their people rise up against them. Even dictators have to follow their constituents. At any rate, all leaders have power and fear the loss of it. Leaders follow.

Jesus

The only reason why I bring this up is because of Jesus, who was leading a small band of followers where they did not want to go. The closer to the Passover they got, all the more of his followers left him. The small group that stayed until right at the end also believed until the end that they were headed for a great triumph.

Our text shows us almost in a comical way the difference between where they were actually going and where they thought they were going.

Jesus, in the fashion of a true leader, educates his followers about their destination by saying, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands. They will kill him, and after three days, he will rise." They did not understand.

Jesus had taught them before and it had gone in one ear and out the other. The concept of his dying was so in conflict with their expectations that they simply could not process the information.

When he had first tried to inform them about it Peter had rebuked him so that Jesus said, "Get behind me Satan, you do not have in mind the things of God."

He would teach them again, and in the same comical fashion, upon the prediction of his doom James and

John would request the highest seats in his court, to sit at his right and left. Apparently they hadn't heard him.

The Disciples

In this case they were arguing amongst themselves about which one of them was the greatest. Apparently Jesus heard them and asked them about it. They gave no answer because deep down they were embarrassed by it. Even if they were headed for a great victory, they were not on the same page with Jesus to be selfishly arguing amongst themselves in that way.

They had all received the same call, "follow me," Jesus had said to them. He never said it would be easy or even what it would look like. They made some assumptions.

At this Jesus became a real teacher. He stopped the journey and sat them all down for a lesson. What he said to them was this, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the last, the servant of all."

Servanthood represents a reversal of values and not just in their time when the principle model of leadership was the emperor. Even in our time after 2,000 years of Christian preaching, "the first shall be last and the last first," and exhorting people to read their bibles daily so that the story of the cross and the divine sacrifice has permeated the culture; and even though our leaders

are still bound by the will of those who follow them, we still have a triumphant view of leadership. We think of big, strong, confident people who assert themselves into situations, and to whom people commit themselves.

The Child

It is at this point that Jesus decides to use a visual aid. He reached out and found a small child and stood him right in the middle of them.

What he said this time was, "whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me, but the one who sent me." What he meant was, "if you want to be great, be like this child."

Just a little later he told them, "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth," he said, "anyone who will not receive the Kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."

Leaders Serve

Now the lesson about leadership actually has implications even for those who are not leaders. It is a reversal of the human value system, which was the driving force of the conversation among the disciples about which among them was the greatest.

The gospel of Christ envisions an ethic of servanthood among all people. Service is to be elevated to the highest level of concern. In our own rhetoric we even call our leaders, “public servants” and expect them to behave, not wasting our money with excess or spending it on themselves.

“I came not to be served, but to serve,” Jesus also said. And each of us has been affected by this message for we know how good it is to help, in that strange way that serving others makes one feel good.

Service, though, is not meant to be self-serving. It is a spiritual discipline designed to help us center our lives in Christ, rather than in ourselves. It is not rare that people become addicted to service because it makes them feel good; some are unwilling to be served, which from that point of view deprives others of the opportunity to feel good too.

Whatever the problems with cultivating a lifestyle of service and generosity may be, it is better to advocate for it than to agree with the modern capitalist motto, “greed is good,” and ethic which leads to destruction. It is in line with the Pope’s message to some of his black sheep, “stop thinking about yourselves and your money.”

Christ offers a life of service for everyone at every station in life, not for selfish ends, but for the sake of Christ, who is our example.

And after his example we must agree that though human leaders too often follow, but not Jesus. True leaders serve, and Christ himself served his disciples when he washed their feet and when he rose upon the cross, and when he returned from the grave with the power of life and death in his hands.

In this power we have been set free from the power of sin and death, and from the obsession with the self; to live and to move and to have our being, to lead lives of courage and sacrifice, and to be servants of all.

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