

Mark 9:30-37  
September 19, 2021

Last Place

The first shall be last, and the last first, so the teaching goes. Last and first are familiar concepts to me because I was a runner who ran races. Most of the time I was in between. As hard as it was to win, which confounded me throughout the whole experience, it would have been harder still to be purposely last. It just went against the energy of the situation. I would have had to stop. Why would someone enter a race and *try* to be last?

Imagine a football team trying to lose, or a baseball player striking out on purpose; or maybe a business person trying to end the year with a loss, just because he likes the red ink. What are we to make of these words from Jesus?

“If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, the servant of all.”

It is not just in the realm of competition that we are challenged. Jesus also offers a striking alternative to the way people tend to think about good and evil. He makes things go upside-down. After Peter’s confession, Jesus begins to try to educate his followers about their near future by telling them over and over again that he will be arrested, tried and convicted, and executed, a prospect they don’t seem able to wrap their brains around. Being arrested/ executed was/is not considered good, but in the Christian story, it is the best thing that ever happened.

Just to emphasize how far off they were in their understanding, we are told that they were discussing amongst themselves their relative standing in the gospel scheme of things, “which one was the most important.” There is a divide between the repeated insistence of the part of Jesus that he would be executed, on the one hand, and on the other, their plans for his glorious victory and their place in his soon to be inaugurated administration.

So Jesus teaches them again about his imminent arrest. It is like Jesus as the master teacher is patiently going over it all again. Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, the servant of all. It occurs to me that the topic here, is life, how to live a successful life.

Part of the context, beyond the historical and literary context in which we find this teaching, is ours, and involves the modern concept of individualism. Increasingly in the present culture we have come to the belief that the best kind of achievements are made by individuals excelling at something, trying to be the best, and that the group’s success is adding up the successes of the most accomplished individuals.

We know that it is a false belief. There are many cliches to illustrate the point. “There is no ‘I’ in ‘team,’” the football coaches say, and “together everyone achieves more,” and they always criticize the players who don’t work well with others. “The whole is more than the sum of the parts.” “No person is an island.”

Human beings are communal. They are not well adapted to the individual life. No matter how much we may like to think otherwise, all success is a group endeavor, it comes from group histories. What Jesus is clearly trying to teach is that what we become together is more important and even more spectacular than any individual achievement signifies.

It is good to keep this in mind as we count home runs and touchdowns and Olympic medals, and dollars, as if there is no such thing as teamwork, no synergism. But even that is at best only a part of what Jesus is saying. The whole endeavor to be the best at something is over-rated. Winning is not really what life is about. Yet, one needs a reason to be in last place.

Jesus gives the reason by reaching into the crowd and pulling out a child. These visual aids that Jesus employs are like fine jewels, they are multi-faceted and fascinating. We can be always looking at them from different viewpoints and finding in them different insights, never pinning them down. The childhood illustration is no different.

In the next chapter (Mark 10), Jesus also uses childhood as an example when he invited the children to come to him and says, “anyone who will not accept the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it.”

Here he takes a different path by saying, “whoever *welcomes* one of these little children in my name *welcomes me . . . and the one who sent me.*” Perhaps it is because there is no pretense about children, or

because they have no agenda, have not yet been taught that particular skill. Maybe it is because they can't pay us back. They are not trying to be first, but we stop for them, and lower ourselves to their level. We step out of our own pretensions and agendas and accept them as they are.

In the gospels Jesus is always moving, and in Mark he seems to be in a hurry, and there are encounters. He stops . . . for Jewish people and for gentiles too. He stops for the sick, the ones who are not at peace inside their own skins, he stops for the hungry, the leper, the social outcast; for each he finds reasons to step aside from his own journey.

He even stops to engage his adversaries, because he cares about them too. But when he teaches about servanthood and needs a visual aid, he chooses a child, and we get the picture. We are not to be the very last just for the sake of it, but *for* someone.

Then there is a kind of irony that happens; it turns out that life is not a race or a game or a competition of any kind. Those are the visual aids of the world. Among the results from pursuing them successfully, are not meaning, joy and peace; are not eternal life. The irony is that when we are last, then we are first; we may lose the race, may even get last place, but we win the life.

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