

FIRST THINGS LAST

Text: Mark 9:33-37

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A woman had tried for years to persuade her egotistical husband to change his ways. He was obsessed with being number one. He never stopped talking about being first in sales at the office. He proclaimed he was first on the list for the next promotion. He had to be first in line to buy tickets for a game and also the first to hit the parking lot after the game.

One day his long-suffering wife watched with interest as he stepped on one of those fortune-telling scales. He dropped a coin in the slot and out came one of those little fortune-telling cards. It read: "You are a born leader, with superior intelligence, quick wit, and a charming manner. You have a magnetic personality and are attractive to the opposite sex."

"Read that," he said to his wife with a hint of gloating. She did. Turning the card over, she said: "It has your weight wrong too."

When our chief goal is to try to impress others with our own importance we have no idea how foolish we really look. How much energy we waste trying to show how much better we are than anyone else. Jesus continually punctured such posturing—like a pin in a balloon full of hot air. Jesus turned—and keeps turning-- our ideas of status and power upside down. That's the lesson this morning. First and foremost, lastly, and everything in between.

Our text is from Mark. The disciples are traveling with Jesus, continuing the journey to Jerusalem. He's just performed some major miracles. He reminds them again what will happen there. He tells them he will suffer and die. As they walk they talk with one another. Arriving at the city of Capernaum they stop to rest. Jesus hears them whispering to one another. He asks them.

"What were you arguing about on the way?" They were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down called the twelve and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

Jesus is about to die and they're arguing over who is most important. At least they have the sense to be embarrassed. They fall silent at his question. Jesus doesn't scold or get angry with them. Instead he offers what one theologian calls "an antidote to their ambition". Jesus always points us towards alternatives way of living in the world. This time it's one that shifts the focus from "self-centered", "me first". It doesn't seek power or prestige at other's expense. It doesn't value success above all service. Jesus isn't looking for "kingdom stars". He wants "kingdom servants". He wants those whose goal and joy is to serve others.

Then he took a little child and put it among them. Taking the child 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."

Who is the greatest? In answer to that question Jesus gives them a visual metaphor. It's an object lesson, a concrete example for the kinetic learners. He sets a child in their midst. If you want to be great in God's eyes, he says, you receive and serve the least. This child is a symbol of one of the least.

Children in Jesus' time held a paradoxical place and position, in that they were simultaneously of great value and of little worth. They represented hope for the future and were a special gift. They were also helpless, powerless and vulnerable. A child was a burden; dependent, needy and non-productive. In a society where persons were given importance by class and structure, children were on the bottom. (I'm not sure how much that has changed in the modern, at least in some places.) It's telling that in Aramaic the word for "child" and "slave" are interchangeable. The child Jesus embraced was one of those without claim or value in society.

That was precisely his point.

In this text Jesus isn't asking us to become like children—he does that specifically elsewhere when he talks elsewhere about how we're to receive the kingdom as trustingly, openly and eagerly as children. **Here, the instruction is in being disciples.** Disciples care for those no one else wants or recognizes. Disciples see to the needs of those who are neglected and without power to help themselves.

Children everywhere are still characterized by vulnerability, dependence and helplessness. They're continually made victims of economic and military policies. They're used as pawns and exploited for their innocence in all too adult ways. They're truly among the least. If we take seriously Jesus' words, "*Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me...*" it means committing ourselves to being advocates for and of children at all levels. It means seeing that in the policies and programs we set—at local community, national, global, and even church levels—the children aren't forgotten. That's the surface application.

One pastor's commentary reads: *Mark uses the term "little ones" to refer to children. He also uses it as a synonym for the poor, the dispossessed, the powerless and the needy. Jesus uses the child as a symbol for all God's "little ones". He's talking about those with no income, status or influence for us to use. He's talking about those who have little or no access to existing systems or structures. He's turning us toward those whose rights are easily set aside*

and discounted because they're not considered important or valuable enough. With this child he lifts before us the very young and the very old, the single mom and the pregnant teen, the homeless, the jobless, the under-employed, the sick, the mentally ill, the physically handicapped, the imprisoned and the ex-prisoners seeking a new life. He asks us to receive all those who are cast aside and disregarded as of no value.

A little boy was sitting at a lunch counter with his mother and older sister. After taking the mother's and sister's orders, the waitress turned to the little brother. "What will you have, young man?" she asked. "I'll order for him," said his sister. The waitress again asked the boy what he'd like. This time the mother said, "I'll order for him." For the third time the waitress repeated, "Young man, what will you have?" "A hamburger," he replied. "Would you like it rare, medium, or well done?" "Well done, please," he said with a smile. "Would you like mustard, pickles, onions, relish, or ketchup?" asked the waitress. In a burst of self-confidence, the boy exclaimed, "The whole works!" As the waitress walked away, the boy turned to his mother. In a voice filled with amazement and wonder he said, "Gee, Mommy, she thinks I'm real."

We talked about hearing doing, and speaking, and not speaking, and so we turn seeing. When we're seen, heard and recognized we're made to feel "real". It means we have something to offer. Value. Worth. Jesus had the gift of seeing those persons that others overlooked. He recognized and affirmed the "invisible ones". One pastor writes: *This gospel text's bumper sticker might be, "Start seeing the invisible." Start seeing the invisible, not because it is virtuous to do so, not so that we can congratulate ourselves on being the greatest at seeing. Start seeing the invisible because to receive the invisible one is to receive Jesus, and to receive Jesus is to receive the one who sent him.*¹

Have you seen the film: [McFarland, USA? It's](#) based on the true story of Coach Jim White and the remarkable team of boys that became cross-country champions.

It's 1987. Coach White reluctantly arrives in the economically depressed town of McFarland. It's one of the poorest cities in America. It's populated predominately by Mexican-Americans who make their living picking in the fields. He's told by one of the school staff: "These are good kids". She quickly adds, "These kids are invisible. They're expendable".

No spoilers here, but you might check it out. That line says with you. "They're invisible; **they're expendable.**" **It makes me wonder. Who are the "invisible ones" here in our communities? Who don't we see?** Who do we think are "expendable"? Who do we easily and all too quickly discount as

¹ Mary E. Hinkle, "Seeing Things", *Living by the Word*, Bendis and Heim, editors, p. 133

having little or “no worth”?

Start seeing the invisible. That’s the hardest challenge yet. It asks us to examine our motives and our actions. Who do we overlook, discount or set aside as having little value? Whose needs do we not recognize? For whom do we assume we have no time? Who has no claim upon us?

Jesus tells his competitive, arguing disciples that the greatest in the kingdom are those who minister to the least and most needy. His instruction is still counterintuitive and counter-cultural. Ours is a success-oriented society. Climb the ladder at work. Be number one in the organization. Make the most money. Wear the right clothes. Drive the fastest cars. Own the most sophisticated electronics. We value most those who “*have it*”—power, prestige, wealth, and fame. We measure ourselves and others by what we possess or achieve. When we lose those things we think we’ve lost our worth also. Understand. Jesus isn’t against working hard, doing our best, getting ahead and striving for success. He wants us to understand that those things aren’t the way we fulfill God’s purpose. They’re ways we make our living. **They don’t give us life.** Jesus singles out the most unlikely, the most forgotten, the most ignored, and the most useless in society. To be great, he says, is to welcome, recognize, affirm, make a place for and serve these.

Jesus came as a child. He came in weakness and vulnerability. He’s still most often found in the midst of those who have the least and need the most. Barbara Brown Taylor commenting on this text writes: *However we chose to organize our lives, we have this little child to remind us that God organizes things otherwise, and that if we want to welcome God into our lives then there is no one we may safely ignore. In the topsy-turvy kingdom of God, the most unlikely people are most likely to be agents of God—if you want to enter this kingdom there is a way, go find a nobody to put your arms around and say hello to God.*²

Go find a nobody to put your arms around and say hello to God. It’s a hard teaching. God’s way of doing things often makes us uncomfortable. If we want to be leaders Jesus says we must serve. If we want to be great he tells us to be humble. If we want to be somebody, Jesus says we must care for those whom the world says are nobody. If we want to gain the kingdom we must give ourselves away. In God’s eyes greatness isn’t measured in terms of how important we are, who we know or what we have. **Real greatness is measured in who and how well we love.**

A journalist once interviewed a man about his service to his community. This man was known for his outreach to outcasts: namely homeless, those who were in prison, and those who were HIV-positive. The journalist asked... why?

² Barbara Brown Taylor, **Bread of Angels**, p. 135

"The reason I do what I do is because of Jesus' body language." "His body language?" asked the journalist. "Yes, his body language," said the man. "Think about Jesus hanging on the cross. His arms are stretched to their fullest extent. Now I realize that his arms are stretched out because they're nailed to the cross, but I believe his arms are stretched to their fullest not just because he's being crucified . . . All his life, Jesus stretched out his arms to their fullest because that was the only way he could welcome absolutely everyone into the full embrace of God's family."

He concluded, "And that needs to be our body language, too."

Jesus 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.**"

May God give us such grace that our only ambition is to be as welcoming and loving as Jesus. Amen.