

On Being #1

Proper 20, Year B – Mark 9:30-37

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson September 23, 2012

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Like many of you, I know, I spent a good part of yesterday flipping from one channel to another trying to check on the teams I keep an eye on, and at the same time checking out the usual spectacle of the crowds of loyal fans. You know what I find amazing? It doesn't matter how far down the pecking order a team might be, how far out of the polls, how unlikely the possibility that they will ever see even a *regional* championship, you still see all of them out there on game day, dressed – and maybe even *painted* – in their team colors, and yelling at the top of their lungs, “We're #1! We're #1! We're #1!”

And then there's the other big game we're all caught up in these days, and it doesn't matter how many times you change the channel, you're not going to avoid *this* one. Now, don't get me wrong, voting is both the privilege and the price of having received the totally accidental gift of being born in one of the most wealthy and free societies humanity has yet known. You will not hear me taking politics from up here, or down there, or in any other official capacity. I'm more than willing to talk to any of you about all *sorts* of things over a meal or a drink or just sitting around chewing the fat – if you hadn't noticed, I like to talk about all *sorts* of things. And it is part of my calling, as a priest *and* as a Christian, to offer public prayers when I am called upon to do so, and I will use such opportunities to call senators and city commissioners and judges and civic leaders to remember both our goodness *and* our shortcomings. But this desk is not a bully pulpit – it is a point of privileged proclamation of the power of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the power to set your heart and mine free, free to love him and to love one another. I will never tell you, from here or from anywhere else, how you should vote. But I will tell you, even from *way* up here, that it is both your right and your *responsibility* to do so. Register and vote.

I am personally very much looking forward to November 6th getting here – so I can cast my ballot, and so I can go back to seeing rapid commercials about the fastest car or smartest phone, rather than the by now billion dollar campaign to tell us how dirty and low-down the other fella is, and how you and I ought to vote the party line, because “We're #1! We're #1! We're #1!”

Everyone wants to be number one: top of the heap, king of the hill, winner first time, *every* time. It is the American way. Actually, both as a student of theology *and* as a student of history, I know that it's not so much the *American* way, as it's the *human* way. Something in us, some part of who we are, just naturally wants to be better and bigger and stronger and faster than the others. What it boils down to is simple: pride – that little human quality that Scripture calls the root of *all* sin. Now don't get me wrong, striving for self-improvement – looking around and looking inside and saying, “I could do better than I am, I could *be* better than I am,” – there's nothing bad about that in and of itself. But too often our striving to be better is driven by sinful pride pure and simple. Instead of looking to see if we have improved we look only to see if we have surpassed the other guy.

And, surprise, surprise, Jesus' disciples had the same condition. Over the last few weeks in our readings from the Gospel, we have heard Jesus explain to them over and over again, that the Messiah would be handed over to the authorities, he would be killed, and he would rise again. Just last week, he slapped ol' Pete pretty hard on this very subject: “Get behind me, Satan!” But are they listening? Apparently not! Over and over again, they flat-out fail to understand what he is telling them. It just doesn't fit their vision of how things *should* turn out. It just doesn't fit *their* plans, so they just refuse to hear it.

Instead they dream of being number one: top of the heap, king of the hill, winner first time, *every* time. They dream of the day when the Messiah would overcome the Romans, a day when Caesar, and Pilate, and Herod would be handed over to be killed. In that day when Jesus was crowned as the King of Israel, there would be victory shouts. And because they had known Jesus back *before* he was the conquering Messiah, *they* would be given special places in his new Kingdom.

So as they walked along, they discussed whether Peter, or maybe Matthew, would be the Chief of Staff in the Kingdom of God that Jesus said was coming. Of course, Judas would be Secretary of the Treasury. James would handle the Department of the Interior. John would make a good Secretary of State – he’s so good with people and all...

At the end of the day’s journey Jesus turns around and asks them, “What were you boys talking about back there?” They didn’t answer. I suspect there was a lot of blue-sky-looking and fingernail-picking and toe-tip-dirt-rearranging. So Jesus sat them down – *again* – and said, “If any of you want to be number one in *my* kingdom, you must be last and servant to all.” And to make it clear, he picked up a child and hugged him and said, “If you just welcome one child, you’re with me *and* the one who sent me.”

But of course, even with all Jesus’ inventive teaching techniques, the disciples still didn’t get it. Later, near the end of his ministry, Jesus taught them again what it means to be number one in God’s kingdom by setting aside his robes of honor and kneeling on the floor to wash their feet. That same night he taught them again, as in mocking purple, with stripes across his back, he stood silently in the courts of governors and kings. The next morning he taught them again by carrying a cross through the heat and the dust and the jeers to the place of execution. And there, to serve all the weak and the lost, to embrace not just a child, but the whole *world*, to teach them once and for all about *his* Kingdom, the Lord of creation spread his arms wide, and was nailed to the cross.

And when it was over, where was Peter, the Chief of Staff? Where were the would-be Secretaries of the Interior and State? Where *were* those who wanted so badly to be number one, those who wanted so badly to bask in the glory of the Kingdom of God? They were gone. The ones who walked behind as he carried his cross to the cursed hill were there. A thief who repented was there. The one that had washed Jesus’ feet with her own tears was there. It wasn’t the ones who chanted “We’re #1! We’re #1! We’re #1!” who were blessed to behold the King coming into his Kingdom. It was those that stooped to pick him up from the dust. It was those that wiped his face and prayed at his bleeding feet. It was those that waited for his broken body to be lowered to their embrace.

Jesus reached out and took a child in his arms, and he says to those that follow him, “Whoever welcomes one such child, welcomes me and the one who sent me.” If we want to receive the Kingdom, we must receive the *King* with our arms wide open and our hands at work. Do you want to be God’s number one? Practice stooping. Do you want to one day hear the words, “Well done, my good and faithful servant?” Practice serving the ones you can reach *right now*. Do you want to embrace the blessed Lamb of God? Practice receiving “the least of these.” Being number one in God’s kingdom is not about conquering or overcoming, it’s about the absolute, unfathomable love of the Almighty God of all creation. It’s about the one who stooped to our broken world to save *you* – and to save *me*. Thanks be to God.