

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
The Rev. Robert M. Alexander
Mark 9:30-37
“Last Place”
17th Sunday after Pentecost
September 20, 2015

“We are the champions, my friends! And we’ll keep on fighting to the end.” You’ve likely sung that or heard it sung at some event – maybe a sporting event or a political rally. We love champions. We love winners!

We hear the chant “We’re #1! We’re #1!” and we watch crazed fans that are so pumped with adrenaline that they scream until they’re hoarse.

You may have cheered for one of the winners of this year’s many athletic contests ...like Novak Djokovic who recently won the U.S. Open Tennis Championship. Or you may have pulled for Tom Brady and the New England Patriots in Super Bowl 49. I’m pretty sure a lot of you cheered for Steph Curry and the Golden State Warriors in the NBA Finals as they went on to win the championship.

It is no surprise that everyone loves to win and everyone loves a winner. Whether it is in athletics, or business, or relationships, we love to succeed. We want to be great. We want to be #1! And Jesus doesn’t seem to have an issue with that. As a matter of fact, in today’s lesson from Mark, Jesus affirms our desire to be great. He affirms our drive to be first, and then re-defines what greatness looks like in the Kingdom of God.

Our gospel lesson begins with Jesus and the disciples on a journey. They were traveling through Galilee – that place of calling – where many of the disciples were called from their former lives and professions to give their all to Jesus and to follow him. Mark describes a sort of traveling classroom. Jesus was continuing to teach them and in doing so he was shaping them to be a particular kind of follower and a particular kind of leader in the church.

Jesus began with difficult words. “The Son of Man is going to be betrayed, will be killed, and then will be raised after three days.” This is the second time in as many chapters that Jesus talked about his death and resurrection. In chapter 8, when Peter spoke up and said, “No Way!” Jesus rebuked him saying, “Get behind me Satan. This is God’s way and you had better get on board.” (That’s my paraphrase).

Well no wonder the disciples were silent in chapter 9 when Jesus started talking about it again. Who wanted to argue with him after what happened to Peter? But in their silence they missed an opportunity to learn and to understand. I am sure they were scared and confused. Peter, James, and John had just had a really bizarre experience when Jesus had been transfigured into dazzling white light before their very eyes and had met with Moses and Elijah. The other disciples who had been left in the valley had experienced a failed attempt at an exorcism until Jesus showed up and took care of things.

Surely the disciples were scared and confused and perhaps that was why Jesus took them away from the crowds for a little retreat. They arrived at their destination in Capernaum, that place they called home, and Jesus gathered them together for another lesson. “What were you talking about on the road?” He asked. You get the sense that they knew they had messed up. It’s like getting your hand caught in the cookie jar. They were probably all thinking “Guys...we shouldn’t have been talking like that!” But no one said anything. Silence again!

The way Mark tells the story I get the impression that it wasn't so much that the disciples didn't get it. I think they probably knew what Jesus was going to say, but he was about to tell them in a different way so they could think again about what this new life that he was calling them to was all about. Jesus doesn't appear upset or impatient. He simply gathered them around as students and rabbi to remind them of what they had perhaps heard many times before. And aren't we the same way? Maybe that is one of the reasons we come to church every week. Maybe that is one of the reasons we read the same passages from the Bible again and again. We do it to remember. We do it to see again what it means to be this community of faith and to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. We do it to catch another and perhaps clearer vision of the life that we have been called to in the Kingdom of God.

So what did Jesus say? "I know you were talking about being great. So if you want to be great – if you want to be first – you've got to be last – you've got to make yourself the servant of all."

What did Jesus mean by "servant of all"? To emphasize the point, he grabbed someone's child that may have been running through the room chasing their sibling – maybe it was Peter's kid – and he held onto that little child and told the disciples that when they welcomed someone like that child that they were welcoming him and the one who sent him. When they welcomed the child – one who in that culture was powerless – without rights, without position, without voice – they welcomed Jesus. When they showed hospitality to someone on the margins, someone who was ignored by others, someone who seemed invisible to the rest of the world, then they were opening their hearts and their lives to Jesus. That is greatness! And it is a radical idea. It is almost as if Jesus is comparing himself to the despised and rejected of society. And the idea that the Messiah was to be viewed in this way was likely as difficult for the disciples to comprehend as it was for them to understand the idea of his suffering and death.

When you look up synonyms for *greatness* you find words like powerful, important, dominant, influential, strong, formidable, distinguished, major, principal, foremost, honored, admired, leading, and top. Jesus was saying that the way to achieve that is to not think about yourself. He is asking us to make ourselves last. Like the Messiah, we are called to place the livelihood and wellbeing of others at the top of our list. It's easier said than done!

We all find ourselves in a hurry most every day. We have our to-do list, our agenda, that thing or those things that have to get done. We hop in our car and take off to the next meeting or appointment or activity and we have blinders on to anything else out there that might need our attention. Isn't it wonderful when someone stops and lets you out at an intersection? Doesn't that just make your day sometimes...especially when you are in a hurry to get somewhere? It is a wonder we don't do it for others more often given that we appreciate it so much. Well, in this morning's passage, Jesus invites us to YIELD to others. To stop and let them go. To notice them. To pay attention to them. To recognize their need and to do what we can to enhance their life. To use our power, our influence, our money, our position to show hospitality to others by recognizing, loving, and serving them.

There is an old Calvin and Hobbes cartoon that shows the little boy, Calvin, walking into the Living Room and standing by his dad's chair. His dad is reading the paper and minding his own business. Calvin waits and waits – for several frames until finally he pulls out a brown paper sack, blows air into it, and pops it! "Pay attention to me!" he shouts! Of course many people would like to be able to do this to get the attention of the world but they cannot. They have no voice. They are pushed to the margins, where they are left alone and ignored.

Jesus invites us to re-write our own agenda for the day in such a way that it includes the needs of others – especially those who are marginalized, silenced, and ignored. How would that change the way you went about your day if you took seriously the call to pay attention to those around you who were powerless and who everyone else ignored. How would it change your day if you showed hospitality to everyone you saw that fit into that category?

“Well – I wouldn’t get anything done!” you might say. What you mean is, you wouldn’t get anything on your original agenda done. This is why we must re-write it.

Our Old Testament lesson today from Isaiah describes the prophet’s call to the people to pay attention to those on the fringe. He calls them to remember who they are as God’s chosen people - to stop going through the motions - and to truly change their attitude toward God and others. The prophet mentions that their false acts of humility don’t impress God. What God wants to see is that they give up their own agenda that is focused only on themselves and that they re-write the agenda – putting themselves in last place.

When Jesus offers this teaching, I wonder if he means for it to apply only to personal relationships or if we can apply it beyond those. What do you think?

On a team of some kind, Jesus may not be saying, let the other team win, but he may be saying, play in such a way that you display the Kingdom of God – through fairness, through honesty and integrity, through compassion, through a recognition of the value of each person on both teams.

In the church universal – not just the particular church – Jesus may be encouraging us to conduct ourselves with kindness and love – valuing the contributions of each body of believers regardless of whether or not they believe exactly the way we do. We are called to work together to serve the least and the lost rather than compete with one another over members and money and popularity. We are called to build one another up rather than talk bad about one another and tear one another down.

In our national affairs what would it look like to re-write our agenda? What if we first gave attention to the marginalized, the ignored, and the silenced? What if when we said that something was in the “best interests of the USA” we really meant that it was in the best interest of our neighbor? Is it possible that we could re-define what it means for America to be “Great?” Is Jesus calling us to that as well?

There has been a great deal of press lately about the visit of Pope Francis this coming week. Whether or not you are a fan of the Pope, I think we can all agree that he has committed his Papacy to serving those who are - as the children of Jesus’ day – unvalued and pushed to the margins. He often speaks of the importance of humility, of putting other’s needs first, and of lifting up the poor and the oppressed. I am interested in what he will say to the people of the US when he speaks this coming week. It is important to acknowledge that his words have great power among a huge segment of the population here and around the world. We should all pray for him as he prepares to address our nation.

Pope Francis was recently interviewed on ABC’s 20/20. Three groups were gathered in various locations around the US and through the wonder of technology the Pope was able to see and interact with each group while he remained in the Vatican. It was a slightly more advanced set-up than our Session’s Skype call with Seminary Student Russ Kerr this past Wednesday night!

During the interview, a teenage girl named Valerie Herrera from Cristo Rey Jesuit High School in Chicago was asked to share her story with the Pope. She shared about how at the age of four she began to

develop *vitiligo*, a rare skin condition that causes loss of pigment. She spoke to Pope Francis through tears at times as she described how she had been bullied and made fun of in school and in her neighborhood. She turned to music as a way both to sooth her pain and to show that she too was a gifted person. After sharing her story, the Pope surprised her by asking her to sing for him and after gathering her courage she sang a simple but beautiful song in Spanish.

Following the song, the Pope answered a question that Valerie had posed to him. “What would he say to the youth of our country?” He answered by speaking of the importance of community and of walking with others on our journey. He spoke about the challenges of life and how we all need others to help us through the difficulties and how we should seek at least one person out who can accompany us on our journey. He spoke of the importance of gathering our courage, much like Valerie had done when she sang her song. When young people act with courage and faith, when they share their gifts to make a difference in the lives of others, God is pleased and blesses us with joy and hope. I encourage you to watch the whole video online.ⁱ

Want I want to highlight is how the Pope created a space where he and Valerie, even across the miles, were able to engage one another. He listened to her story, opened his heart to her and welcomed her into his life. He heard her pain, acknowledged it and created space for her to share her music with him, something that she had said was therapeutic to her. Pope Frances welcomed Valerie and in doing so, welcomed Jesus and the one who sent Jesus, God the Father.

And so I end with a question. What will you do today to re-write your agenda so that your needs are placed last and the lives of those on the margins are placed front and center? What will you do to notice the one who no-one else notices? What will you do to create space in your life and in your heart for the one who never gets attention? What will you do to show hospitality to one who has been forgotten by the world?

Jesus re-defines greatness. In God’s Kingdom we arrive at greatness by another road. And that road is Jesus – the way, the truth, and the life – who taught us what it means to lay down our lives for the sake of another. May we remember his words today and tomorrow and with God’s help, make them reality.

To God be the Glory! Amen.

ⁱ <http://abcnews.go.com/2020/video/pope-francis-asks-chicago-teen-sing-part-33551358>