

Mark 9:30-37 *They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were,³¹ because he was teaching his disciples. He said to them, “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.”³² But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.³³ They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the road?”³⁴ But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.³⁵ Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, “Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.”³⁶ He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them,³⁷ “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.”*

To be first, be last

1. Jesus was last so we could be first.
2. Let's make ourselves last, then we are first

A couple weeks ago, Luke and our granddaughters were here for the weekend. On Saturday we went to the Titledown District in Green Bay. It's a neat area for families. It has Ahrens Hill, lots of games, a great playground for the kids and a football field that you can play on. The girls played on the playground while Luke relived his glory days kicking field goals. They also have a 40-yard dash there with several lanes. I asked if anybody wanted to race me and Alex, our six-year-old granddaughter, said she would. Luke told me she is fast. So, Alex and I raced twice and we tied both times. I wonder how that happened?

If a person wants to be first, you have to be the fastest, strongest, best. That is the way it works in sports. The bench warmer does not win the Heisman Trophy. It's won by the best college football player. The last place team does not go to the world series. That's for the teams that win the pennant. This is true in a lot of other things besides sports, but in life, it's not true. Jesus shows us in our lesson today that to be first, be last.

Jesus understood this best of all, because God called him to do the dirtiest job of all. He told his disciples, *“The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.”* Nobody praised Jesus for going to the cross that day. Women were mourning over him. His disciples were deserting him. The soldiers were mocking him. He allowed himself to be handled by filthy sinners and to suffer the most humiliating and excruciating death used at the time – the cross. On the cross, Jesus became the least – the worst of sinners – all of the sinners in the world. Yet, after all was said and done, Jesus raised from the dead and God made him first. With that death and resurrection, Jesus earned the reward that he came for: the sins of the world had been paid, those who now believe in Jesus are holy in God's sight and will rise from the dead. It wasn't a glamorous job that Jesus was called to do, but it gave eternal rewards to all who believe in him. In becoming last, Jesus became first, and so did we! No matter who you are – young or old, rich or poor, famous or infamous, you are all number one on God's list through faith in Jesus. (Pankow)

And the disciples didn't get it.

And the depth to which they didn't get it is indicated by the language Mark used. The Greek language has a way of indicating things that we can't put into English very easily. Jesus had taken the disciples away by themselves so that he could teach his disciples. The language indicates that during this whole time Jesus was teaching about what was going to happen to him. He didn't just say it once; he kept on talking about this. And it also indicates that during that whole time the disciples continued to not get it. They could not, they would not understand what he meant.

Because to them, to be first, you had to be first. They confessed Jesus to be the Messiah. They believed him to be the Son of David and the King of Israel. They expected him to take his kingdom. You don't do that by being last. You don't do that by being handed over to people who will kill him. You do that by making yourself first, by winning the kingdom. It didn't make sense to them.

It does to us, though, doesn't it? Because we have the whole story. We know that Jesus had to die because of our sins. Because we have been selfish, because we think we are better than others, because we put ourselves before others, Jesus had to die. He had to die and rise again, because if Jesus didn't rise from the dead, as Paul wrote, we are still in our sins. If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, he is not God and if he is not God, God didn't die on the cross. If he is just a man, his death means nothing to us. But Jesus is God and God did die for our sins. His resurrection proves that.

Our sins are forgiven. We were last and on our way to hell, but through faith in Jesus, we are first and on our way to heaven.

Now, we are free to be like Jesus and serve others. *They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?"*³⁴ *But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.* Jesus has just proclaimed that his own life involves suffering and the supreme act of sacrifice, and the astounding response of the disciples is to spend the rest of the day sauntering down the road to Capernaum discussing which one of them will turn out to be the most valuable player!

Just thing about it. Jesus embodies sacrifice; they jockey for position. Jesus announces his own suffering; they argue over reserved parking spaces and who gets to ride first class. So, Jesus teaches them about service by embracing a young child.

*Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all."*³⁶ *He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them,*³⁷ *"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."* Children are most often the most ungrateful critters on the face of this earth. You can spend a whole afternoon playing ball or changing their diapers, and they just turn and go on to the next activity without even issuing so much as a "thanks!" It is one of the most unrecognized jobs in the world. Nobody sees you feed your children. Nobody sees you clothe them. The very ones you are trying to help often times yell at you and whine to you. It is a seemingly insignificant job – to welcome a child. Yet, Jesus says this is what service is all about.

In foreign countries people will build and paint their gods out of wood. They'll build houses for their gods, shine them, carry them into safety from the rain, and think that by taking care of this block of wood they are earning their gods' favors. In that way they think they are serving their god. Others will climb mountains and wear hardly any clothing to try and get some sort of contact with their god of nature. But do you see how our God does it differently? Instead of having us make our god, our God gives Himself a runny nose and puts on a dirty stinking diaper. With tears in His eyes, He cries out to you, "Hold me! Change me! Rock me! Feed me!" He comes in the form of the most ungrateful critter on earth and says, "If you want to serve ME, then serve this CHILD that I have put on this earth for you to take care of!" True service - things that God rewards - are not jumping in front of trains or blowing yourself up in the name of freedom or marching in picket lines, but wiping rear ends and runny noses, putting on clothes and feeding supper. (Pankow)

Too often, we want people to look up to us. So, we have the big house, the nice care, the latest clothes. We want to impress people with our status. Instead of trying to impress others, let's humble ourselves to serve others. Help your neighbor even though he always slaps you on the back with his sweaty hand. Help your friend move, even though you know how hard moving is. Pick up after your brother even though you didn't make the mess. Help mom with dinner, even when she doesn't ask. Visit grandma and grandpa, even if it's boring.

In serving the least among us, we are doing just what God did for us. In order for God to serve us, he had to stoop down to our level, and take on our flesh. Jesus humbled himself and becomes last of all in taking our sin to the cross and dying for it there. And through becoming the least of all, he becomes the servant of all, and the greatest of all.

In sports, try your best. Be your best. Give your best. Play to win and be number one. But in life, make yourself last and servant of all. Don't always look out for number one, but give yourself in service to others. When you do so, you are serving Jesus. Oh, and let your granddaughter win sometimes.