

“God’s #1”  
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky  
18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 20B) – 22 & 23 September 2018  
James 3:13 – 4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:20-37

It’s a little silly to see the disciples jostling for position, arguing about who was #1, especially considering what just happened. A man brought them his son, controlled by a demon since childhood. This evil force tortured him: caused seizures, kept him from speaking, thrust him into fire and water. It’s almost unimaginable the agony that family felt, helpless and always afraid, waiting for the day when the demon would finally kill their son.

So the father brought him to the disciples, begging for help. After all, not long ago they’d gone on a mission trip to spread the good news, and along the way, “They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.” [Mark 6:13] Just as people couldn’t keep quiet about what Jesus did, word of the wonders God worked through the disciples would have spread. They represented hope for a man in despair, but they could do nothing.

Then Jesus came and cast out the demon. “His disciples asked him privately, ‘Why could we not cast it out?’” Jesus replied, “This kind can come out only through prayer.” [Mark 9:28-29] Now presumably, they did pray, like any sensible person would during an exorcism, but perhaps they fell into the trap James warns about: “You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly.”

It’s hard to see how you could pray wrongly when it comes to getting rid of a demon. One might think that something along the lines of, “God, cast out this demon,” might suffice. But you can ask for the right thing in the wrong way and for the wrong reasons. James emphasized the role of motive in prayer. So perhaps the disciples, who would shortly be arguing

about who was the best, viewed this as an opportunity to cement their claim to be ranked right at the top. That could have easily led them into prayer malpractice, which left them powerless.

They all failed, and this probably intensified their arguing. People tend to jockey for position harder when things aren't going well, when life seems uncertain, when they feel insecure and need a way to compensate for inadequacies, real or perceived. We crave recognition and dislike criticism. We avoid necessary risks for fear of bad outcomes, and we take unnecessary risks to find the fulfillment and affirmation we so desperately desire.

In all of this, we can be so like the original disciples: confused; in denial, unaware of what Jesus is up to and how we're meant to respond. Like those first followers, we can also enjoy some successes, and then forget that our triumphs come solely from the grace of God. We can get puffed up with pride: big on the outside, hollow on the inside, very vulnerable, which makes us defensive at the slightest challenge, the tiniest threat.

So in the wake of their big crash-and-burn, the disciples fought about who was the greatest. Now remember, this is immediately after Jesus had told them, for the second time, that he would be betrayed, killed, and then raised from the dead. That should be plenty to occupy a person's mind, "but they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him," so they argued instead.

Jesus noticed the raised voices, the pointing fingers, but didn't hear what they were saying. So he asked them "What were you arguing about on the way?" They stayed silent. Problem is, Jesus already knew, because Jesus always knows, and he answered his own rhetorical question by sitting the disciples down for a little chat.

Now if had James been there, he might have said, "Where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder . . . . Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they

come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?” But James wasn’t there, and Jesus knew the power of a visual parable, so he picked up a little child to serve as a symbol of what humility really means.

Now to understand what Jesus did and why, we need to know that a child in 1<sup>st</sup> Century Palestine had the lowest status in a family, except slaves. When there was a family meeting on how to parcel out chores or where to go on vacation, the kids didn’t get a vote. Matthew 19:14 illustrates this clearly. People wanted Jesus to bless their children, but the disciples pushed them away. “The revered rabbi can’t be bothered by these little urchins. Get them out of here.” They weren’t being nasty. That was normal in their world.

So the child Jesus put in his lap represented what another verse from Matthew calls “the least of these,” [Matthew 25:40], the person at the bottom of the heap, the most vulnerable and least powerful, the person who has no claim to being the best, because they have no claim to anything. In this world, they are ignored, forgotten, disregarded, and despised by some. Their opinion counts for nothing. Yet to welcome Jesus, one must welcome the child and all that the child represents, namely “the least of these.” For “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”

What a radical reversal that is of the lies the world grinds into us. What an exposure of the foolishness, the emptiness of pride. Now let’s be clear. This is not a rejection of the pursuit of excellence. God wants us to exercise the gifts we’ve been given to their utmost. Nor is this a denial that in human communities some bear more authority and power than others. Chaos would erupt if society were completely unstructured. No, this has more to do with attitude, with motivation, with perspective that results in proper prayer and proper action.

As Christians, we need to regularly ask, “Is life a zero-sum game, or are there genuine win/win scenarios we are meant to strive for? Is power meant to be abused for sake of self, or devoted to the common good? What godly purpose does a sense of superiority and entitlement serve?”

“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” That’s the epitome of humility. But in our world, so many mock and despise humility that there are many misperceptions. For example, to be humble does not mean self-loathing. You are a child of God, and whatever you’ve done or not done – none of it can erase your identity as a beloved child of God. Rely on that, and let go of self-hatred. It’s easier said than done, I know, but God loves you, and that is an invincible, eternal reality.

This leads us to the true heart of what it means to humble, and it is a paradox. You are and are not the center of the universe, both at the same time.

Some people believe that they are the center of the universe and everything revolves around them. They are entitled and privileged. From time to time, we’ve met such people, and from time to time, we’ve been that person. It all relates to me, and if it doesn’t, it should, and I’m going to do everything humanly possible to make sure that it does. This is not an either/or situation. It afflicts all of us to varying degrees from time to time.

The desire to be at the center of everything arises as a compensatory measure, because there’s a great big hole in our souls that desperately needs to be filled. The hole opens up when we’re disconnected from God, and that’s really the essence of sin. So we reach out for whatever we can lay our hands on to fill up that hole, but it never works because only God can fill it, and life becomes an exhausting exercise in futility.

This way of being the center of the universe leads to selfish and childish behavior, to misery, to dependence on the fickle opinions of others for our sense of self-worth. It leads to a life where there is always scarcity, never abundance; always threat and fear instead of security and joy. But there is another way, a better way. There is a godly and humble way to be the center of the universe. However, before we can go there, we need to look at how we are not the center of the universe.

There are many ways to clue into this, but one of my favorites is to go out on a clear night and look at the stars. They are beautiful and immensely powerful, both living-giving and deadly. The light you see has been travelling as fast as anything can for millions and billions of years to reach us. It's awe-inspiring to behold the grandeur of God's creation. Yet from our perspective, the stars are so tiny, and many of them no longer exist. The light we see is all that's left. The fire went out long ago.

And here we are on this little blue-green speck of a planet, glorious and yet so fragile, and on this Earth, each of us is merely one among some 8 billion. Our lives, no matter how long, last less than a blink of an eye in historical terms, not to mention cosmic terms. And that's humbling.

We really aren't in charge of very much. God is, and that's liberating, if we trust Him. Our choices do matter. Our efforts are not in vain. But none of us needs to feel as if we carry the whole world on our shoulders, because we can't. What a relief that is. None of us is the center of the universe. God is.

But God is with us, inside and among us, and so somehow, paradoxically, we both are and are not the center of the universe. This way of being at the center with God is inclusive, not exclusive like the other way, but inclusive of "the least of these." It fosters a childlike – not a

childish, but a childlike – acceptance that grace is more than sufficient, that we can rely on God like we would a perfect parent. It nurtures true humility because we know that in the midst of this unimaginably vast and mysterious universe, God loves each of us individually and intensely.

With a humble heart, you might be at the top of the heap, whatever heap that might be, but you don't **need** to be there in order to feel hope and joy and love and peace. You can be content with being in the middle, with coming in 73<sup>rd</sup>. With a humble heart, you don't feel the pressure that everything depends on you or that every flaw or failure will bring your world crashing down around your ears. With a humble heart, we can be free from rancor, that rage that permeates our culture, and we can be free to really live. And that's much better than fighting and obsessing over being #1, whatever that means. Amen.