

23 September 2018

Whitsuntide Eighteen

St Mark 9: 30 - 37

In so many areas of life we are somewhere between curious and obsessive about ranking and scores. Sports fans keep careful track of how their favourite teams are doing, and where they rank in the standings. Students, their teachers, and parents keep track of class rank because it is one of the keys to getting into a first tier college or university. We follow and track our financial investments, the produce or flowers in our garden, and a host of other things such as our health, the weather, and countless other things, perhaps doing it so routinely that we don't even think about it.

For the most part, that is a good thing. It's a good thing to track ourselves so we don't become complacent and lazy. And, sometimes the right sort of competition brings out the best in us. But under other circumstances, when we use it in an attempt to elevate our status, or when the keeping track of numbers if of supreme importance, it is toxic.

I can well imagine the frustration of Jesus that day as they were walking along the roads. Because He was explaining to them the most important spiritual lessons for them and for the entire world, Jesus was trying to avoid the crowds. He was focusing on just the disciples, telling them the basic outline for the latter part of Holy Week, and what was going to happen. This was more than merely telling them the time-line and calendar of events, but an explanation of the events so they would be prepared to see God's plan for the world, and how all of this was so vitally important.

St Mark tells us that it was very hard for them to hear this, think it over, and talk with Jesus about it. I am sure that if we had been in their sandals, we would feel much the same way. This is not logical, this doesn't make sense, I can't get my mind around it. What's worse, it sounds like self-destructive madness. Maybe they thought Jesus was delusional.

So, instead of listening, silently thinking about it, or meditating and then asking questions, they slipped right into the most human of responses. They ignored it by changing the subject into a petty squabble over who was the best disciple, the most useful, and most important.

That is where is where the conversation became toxic. Who is the best disciple? Who is the most helpful and useful to Jesus? Who is the master's favourite? Who does the most work and should be recognized for it? Who is Mr. Congeniality?

That sort of thinking and talk is what we find in so many areas of the secular world - boasting, bragging, egotism, smug arrogance, and more. After telling them to stop it, Jesus explained that in God's scheme of things, there is no room for that attitude. In God's economy, the person of true value is the one who quietly gets on with his or her work, takes care of others, and has a servant's heart.

For a moment, think back to the people who had the greatest influence on your life. People you knew personally. They were important to you because they spent time with you, and even if it was only in small segments, they focused on you. Perhaps they had other work to do, but they put their attention on you for a few minutes. They noticed you, they focused on you, and in some way it changed your life. Maybe it was a teacher. Maybe a neighbour who ignores a ringing cell phone because the two of you are talking, and that was more important than a call that could go to voice mail and be answered later. In those brief moments, they served you because they had a servant's heart.

I know I have often mentioned Doctors Will and Charlie Mayo, and I make no apology for it. They were hometown boys who came back from medical school and decided to stay in Rochester. They could have gone to any large city and modern hospital in the country, but they believed that the people in a town of 5,000 deserved the same care as the people in a city a hundred times as large. They knew they had a sacred calling to care for the people.

Even after they had become internationally famous, they would wander into a store or see an older person from the pioneer days, and talk with them. They didn't stand on ceremony in their personal life - they simply cared about people, asking about their children and grandchildren, delighting in their stories, and for a few brief moments, making that individual feel like the king or queen of the world.

Have you ever read the letters of President Washington, some of the Founding Fathers, signers of the Declaration of Independence or the Federalist Papers. After the body of the letter and before their signature you will usually find the closing, "Your obedient servant." Today, that looks like a stilted bit of formality, and we have reduced it down to one word, "Yours." But it is more than conformity to the etiquette of the day.

Those men who we hold in awe and reverence today, truly saw themselves as servants. As the general of the Continental Army, Washington saw himself as a servant of Congress. As president, a servant of the people. So did the others. We even say that they served as national leaders. They inspire us and bring out the best in us.

Having a servant's heart, being a caring servant to others is our calling, too. Even though this happened several years ago, it brief moment stays in my mind. Steve Chase and I were in front of Pumpernickel's Restaurant early one Sunday afternoon when he spotted a gentleman coming down the street wear a cap that indicated he was a Korean War veteran of the Marine Corp, as is Steve. He turned to the man, offered his hand and said, "Thank you for your service. Viet Nam." Now, the men and women who served in Korea and Viet Nam didn't get the recognition of the Doughboys and GIs. There were no ticker tape parades for them, no cheering crowds to say 'thank you' and I know many of them were hurt because of it. Steve's moment of recognition and thank you won't make amends for what didn't happen years ago, but it meant a great deal to both of those men in the moment.

As I see it, those are but two secular examples which can lead us to spiritual truth, especially when we apply them to life under the broad umbrella of our Christian faith. That is always true here at All Saints, and we are blessed because we see it happening so often. The truth of the matter is, it happens more often than we realized - individuals or groups quietly caring for and serving others.

And in turn, it is the wonderful stepping stone to moving beyond caring just for ourselves, but for others around us. We have no idea how many people are lonely and wished they could belong to something bigger and greater than themselves. Do you have any idea how much potential good you can do by extending the invitation to visit here? Perhaps they will find, as we have, a spiritual home. Or, if Sunday morning doesn't appeal to them just now, perhaps one of our upcoming activities?

Many of us as individuals, as well as our parish as a whole, are supportive of the various charities in our areas. But perhaps spending time with others is something you want to consider - serving not only the physical needs of others, but making yourself vulnerable to them as a whole person, a brother or sister who also was given life by God.

Again and again and again, we see Jesus doing that. Welcoming children in the midst of conversations with other adults, touching a blind man, leper, or paralyzed person. Having dinner with tax collectors who were scorned, despised and shunned by their neighbours. Talking one on one with Pharisees who were probably the most status obsessed people of that era, or with Sadducees who had the sickening realization that their group believed that when a person dies that is the end. Period.

That is what Jesus was trying to teach to his disciples by word and example. It is the eternal message that still applies to us today.