

Who Wants to Be First?

September 22, 2024

Jeremiah 11:18-20

Mark 9:30-37

Who wants to be first?

I do, of course. I want to be first in the buffet line, and I want to be first getting onto the airplane, and I definitely want to be first off the airplane if I have a short layover, and I want to be first in my class, and I want to be first to select a seat in the theater.

I admit that, with the last name “Anderson,” I was usually assigned the first seat on the left side of the classroom. Except in Chemistry class, when Miss Ames sat ahead of me. My friend whose last name was “Yee” sat in the rear seat on the right side.

Even though I was a pretty good student, I didn’t always want to be under the teacher’s eye like that. Not to mention that if I wasn’t assigned there, I could sit with my friend, who was a fun guy to be with and, on the rare occasions we did get to sit near one another, we were pretty good at distracting one another much like I’m now distracted from this sermon.

The disciples wanted to be first. Until Jesus wanted one of them to tell him what was going on. Then... nobody wanted to be first. Not even Simon Peter, who usually had an answer to any of Jesus’ questions. In fairness, Mark tells this story not long after Simon Peter had had two pretty big and somewhat traumatic experiences. In chapter eight, Peter was the one to declare that Jesus was the Messiah – that must have been a high moment for him. A moment later, though, he protested Jesus’ announcement that the Messiah would be arrested and killed. Jesus’ response was harsh: “Get behind me, Satan!”

At the beginning of this chapter, chapter nine, Peter, James, and John joined Jesus in the trek up a mountain and experienced the Transfiguration, when a glowing Jesus spoke with those great prophets Moses and Elijah. Simon Peter offered to put up shelters for them, but a voice from heaven silenced him, thundering the words, “Listen to him!”

Getting silenced harshly by Jesus is rough. Getting silenced by the voice of God? I’d be quiet.

I think.

Nobody wanted to be first to tell Jesus what they’d been arguing about.

Everybody wanted to be first in what they'd been arguing about. Everybody wanted to be the greatest.

Except... Jesus.

Courtney V. Buggs writes at Working Preacher, "Gentleness and kindness are virtues that sound good, but grit and ruthlessness are often associated with the most powerful and successful. Ambition is celebrated for some, critiqued in others. Jesus disrupts their notion of greatness and significance with an inversion of the social order: 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant [also translated minister] of all' (verse 35)."

As Cheryl Lindsay writes at UCC.org, "If Jesus was concerned about his position, the incarnation would not have taken place. His very being embodies the shift he invites the disciples to embrace."

In that moment, in that house, I'm not surprised the disciples didn't understand. Divine incarnation was not a significant element of Jewish theology. The Greeks and the Romans had stories about wandering gods. Jesus' friends had probably heard a couple of them. Jews did have stories about interactions with disguised angels (remember Abraham's three visitors), but they maintained some distinction between messengers of God and God. They weren't going to think of Jesus as being God incarnate.

They would think of him as being Messiah, but as I've said before, the dominant belief about the Messiah in the first century was that he would be the military and political leader to free the Israelites from Greek and Roman rule. Successful military and political leaders aren't rejected or executed. Jesus' predictions about "the Son of Man" didn't make sense. They already had seen Jesus' reaction to Peter's protest.

Nobody wanted to be first with that one. Or, well, second.

They would have been happy to be second to Jesus, which would put one of them first among the twelve. In chapter ten Mark told the story of James and John asking Jesus to sit at his right and left "in his glory" – in other words, when he overthrew the Romans and sat upon his throne. They still didn't get it.

Jesus took the opportunity to say, again, "...whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many (Mark 10:43-45)."

In the first century, that ran against the grain. Very few people could reasonably hope to attain the heights of wealth and power, but they wanted to get there. In the twenty-first century, well, as Dan Clendenin writes at JourneyWithJesus.net, "I think it's fair to say that our contemporary culture is obsessed with greatness. Consider the endless iterations of the GOAT

meme. Who is the 'greatest of all time' artist, athlete, musician, or president? There's even a television reality show called The Goat, in which 'reality stars' from other reality shows compete for the title of the greatest reality show contestant of all time. You can't make this up, right?"

You can, but nobody would believe you.

They didn't believe Jesus, either, despite his constant repetitions. It took the cross and the resurrection to show them that when he said it, he meant it. Be a helper. Be a caretaker. Welcome the most vulnerable – like this child here. Serve serve serve serve serve. If you want to strive for greatness, strive to serve the most people the most effectively and the most compassionately. Serve all the way to the cross.

As D. Mark Davis writes at [LeftBehindAndLovingIt](#), "Perhaps this is the most scandalous of scandals in Mark's gospel. By identifying so radically with a child, by embracing the road to rejection, suffering, dying and being raised, Jesus is re-defining both greatness and Godness. It is not in the glory and honor of the Caesars, but in the vulnerability of a child that we encounter God."

Who wants to be first?

It's worth mentioning that Jesus wasn't the only one who knew this. In the second century Jewish rabbis collected what their predecessors had said about the Book of Exodus. Among the stories was one about Rabbi Gamaliel serving his fellow teachers at a meal. They thought he shouldn't do such a thing, that it was beneath his dignity. But one of the rabbis said, "Abraham himself served his three visiting angels." And then another said there was one greater than Abraham who served:

"The Holy One, blessed be he!
He gives to each and every one what he needs
and to everybody what is wanting ---
and not just to proper people [benei Adam kosherim],
but also to evil people and to people who worship idols."

How much more should we accept God's invitation, instruction, and encouragement to serve?

I know it's counter-cultural and counter-intuitive. I know the pursuit of excellence is also a worthwhile value. But we pursue excellence in so many wrong things. We "keep up with the Joneses," when we could be helping to raise up the Joneses.

As Karoline Lewis writes at [Working Preacher](#), "Mark is pointing to something important, something essential, about believing in Jesus. Because God becoming human, the incarnation, upended every assumption of greatness that the world deemed as definitive. Because God becoming human decided that greatness is not about separation but solidarity, not about

better than but relationship. Not about self-adulation but empowerment and encouragement of the other.”

Who are you doing your work for? Is it for your family? That’s not bad. Families are important and it’s vital to meet their needs. Are you working for friends? That’s not bad, either. Support and encouragement builds and maintains strong relationships.

Are you working for a community with which you identify? That’s good, too. Human beings need communities in order to be human. But... do you stop there? Are there no children in other communities with whom you’re concerned? Are there children within this community who do not receive your care? Are there needs that go unmet, not because there aren’t the resources, but because there isn’t the will?

“What if Jesus is right?” asks David Lose at davidlose.net. “I mean, what if we imagined that greatness wasn’t about power and wealth and fame and all the rest, but instead we measured greatness by how much we share with others, how much we take care of others, how much we love others, how much we serve others. What kind of world would we live in?”

Who wants to live in that world?

Who wants to be first?

Amen.

by Eric Anderson