

Sermon for September 23, 2018

“We're #1”

Mark 9:30-37

We're #1! We're #1! We're #1! We're #1! Everyone wants to be number one. To be on top, the king of the hill. To win it all. We want our teams to win, it is the American way. We even take pride that our county is the strongest; the last remaining superpower.

I guess it is part of being human. We just naturally want to be better and bigger and stronger and faster than the others. It's a source of pride.

But that is what being #1 all boils down to: pride. The root of all sin. Now don't get me wrong striving for self-improvement is not bad in and of itself. But often times our striving to be better is driven by sinful pride pure and simple. Instead of looking to see if we have improved we look only to see if we have surpassed others. Then we can say, "We're #1!"

The disciples were human and had this same bent toward pride. Jesus had explained to them over and over. The Messiah will be handed over and killed and rise again. But they failed to understand. They couldn't accept that Jesus would be beaten and killed, that evil powers would physically subdue the Son of God. It didn't fit their plans of conquest and glory. So they refused to hear it.

Instead they dreamed of being number one. They dreamed of the day when the Messiah would overcome the Romans. A day when Caesar, and Pilot, and Herod would be handed over to be killed. In that day when Jesus was crowned as the King of Israel there would be victory shouts.

And because they knew Jesus back before he had conquered, they would be given special places in the new Kingdom. They discussed whether Peter or Matthew would be the Chief of State in this Kingdom of God that Jesus said was coming. Judas would be Secretary of the Treasury they decided. James would handle the Department of the Interior and John would head the Foreign Affairs division, and so on...

At the end of the day's journey Jesus asked, "What were you talking about on the road?" They didn't answer, but Jesus knew. So he sat them down and said, "If any would be number one in my kingdom you must be last and servant to all." Then he took a child and hugged it and said, "If you will but embrace one such child, you embrace me and not only that, but you embrace the one who sent me as well."

The disciples still didn't understand despite Jesus' inventive teaching techniques. Later, near the end of his ministry, Jesus tried to teach them again what it meant to be number one in God's kingdom. He did so by kneeling on the floor and washed his disciples' feet. Then, the next day he taught them by carrying a cross of sin and shame. And to embrace not just a child but the whole world he spread his arms wide and was nailed to the cross.

That was his coronation as the King of kings - a crown of thorns. And when it was over, where was Peter the Chief of State, or James and John the Secretaries of the Interior or Foreign Affairs? Where were those twelve disciples who wanted to bask in the glory of God's number one? They were gone. Only the women remained. Yes, the women who had traveled with the disciples attending to their needs stooping to care for them and never demanding a post or position or recognition. At that moment of Christ's victory over sin, it was the servants who were at his feet. It

was not the ones who sought to be number one but the ones who only sought to serve who were blessed to embrace the holy Lamb of God at that moment of his sacrifice.

All this reminds me of a story.

Once upon a time there was a Squire who longed to be a knight. He wanted to serve his king and be the most honorable and noble knight who ever lived. At his knighting he was so overcome by dedication that he made a special oath. He vowed to bow his knees and lift his arms in homage to his king and him alone. This knight was given the task of guarding a city on the frontier of the kingdom. Every day he stood at attention by the gate of the city in full armor.

Years passed. One day as he was standing at attention guarding his post a peasant woman passed by with goods for the market. Her cart turned over spilling potatoes and carrots and onions everywhere. The woman hurried to get them all back in her cart. But the knight wouldn't help the poor woman. He just stood at attention lest he break his vow by bending his knees to help pick up the woman's goods. Time passed and one day a man with one leg was passing by and his crutch broke. "Good knight, sir, reach down and help me up." But the knight would not stoop or lift a hand to help lest he break his vow. Years and decades passed, the knight was getting old. One day his grandson came by and said, "Grandpa pick me up and take me to the fair." But he would not stoop lest he break his vow to the king.

Finally after years the king came to visit and inspect the knight. As the king approached the knight just stood there at attention. The king inspected him as he stood there, but then he noticed that the knight was crying. You are one of the noblest knights I have ever seen, why do you cry? Your majesty, I took a vow that I would bow and lift my arms in homage to you but I am unable to keep my vow. These years have done their work and the joints of my armor are rusted. I cannot lift my arms or bend my knees. With the loving voice of a parent the King replied, "Perhaps if you had knelt to help all those who passed by, and lifted your arms to embrace all those who came to you, you would have been able to keep your vow to pay me homage today."

Do you want to be God's number one? Do you want to embrace the Messiah the Lamb of God? Then practice stooping. Practice the art of humility. Reach down to give a hand to someone in need. Sacrifice your wants for the needs of another.

Jesus embraced a small child and said, "Whoever receives one such child receives me and the one who sent me." Most people in Jesus' day would overlook a child, but not Jesus. If we want to receive the kingdom, we must receive the King. This king is not received by pomp and circumstance. He is received by humility and servitude.

Being number one in God's kingdom is not about conquering or overcoming another. It's about putting others first. It's about the love of an Almighty God who stooped to a sinful world to be beaten, mocked and killed. And why did God do it? Jesus did it so that a sinful wretch like me might be saved.