

Do Unto Others

Mark 9:30-37

July 12, 2009

I.

I remember some thoughts I had recently. Things were going pretty well. I had not gotten upset with anyone and no one had irritated me. I had not been greedy or grumpy or nasty or selfish or over-indulgent. I wasn't worried about schedules or agendas or meetings. And then I had to turn off the alarm clock and get out of bed.

And what happens when we get out of bed? We go into the world. And what happens when we go into the world? We might start thinking about ourselves. And then it can become easier to do what the disciples did in today's Gospel reading.

And as a way to get into today's reading, let me ask another question. What do Mother Theresa and Henry Kissinger have in common?

Mother Theresa served the poor all her life, lived in meager surroundings, and probably didn't have two nickels to rub together. Henry Kissinger was one of the most powerful men on earth, served at the highest levels of American government, founded a multi-million dollar consulting business, and owned luxurious homes in Washington, Manhattan, and Connecticut. How do Mother Theresa and Henry Kissinger share anything?

The answer is both won the Nobel Peace Prize. When the competition was concluded and the balloting was over, both were first, not last. And I ask that you keep this comparison in your minds. It can set the stage for an understanding of today's Gospel.

II.

This reading we just heard describes one of a series of significant events in Jesus' ministry. He had finished teaching in Galilee, and was on his way to Jerusalem and the cross. A few verses earlier Peter acknowledged that Jesus was Messiah. And just before this reading Jesus was transfigured on a mountain where God spoke to the disciples out of a cloud. Today, Jesus told them that he would be delivered into the hands of his enemies and be killed.

This was pretty important stuff. It was the beginning of the end for Jesus. You would think it was a time to be serious and contemplative. You would think the disciples would be concerned about Jesus and what he said was going to happen.

But what were they doing during this time? They were thinking about themselves and arguing over who was the greatest. Maybe they still thought Jesus was going to drive the Romans out of Palestine and restore the nation of Israel. As in political campaigns, maybe they thought they were going to be the next cabinet, or perhaps they were debating about who was entitled to the best jobs in the new administration.

After all, they had become high visibility people. The crowds and the excitement of Jesus' miracles must have been exhilarating. Perhaps they thought their days as obscure fishermen and farmers and shopkeepers were over. They were going to Jerusalem with Jesus for something big. They might not have fully understood what it was, but it seemed things were about to change.

Try to visualize the same thing in a contemporary setting. Suppose the Saints won the NFC championship and it was Super Bowl Sunday. Put yourself in the locker room just before game time. Imagine the players are dressed, the coaches have given their final instructions, and it is about time to go onto the field.

And then, what if the players started arguing among themselves about who was the greatest? What if they began to disagree on who had the best season, or who would get to hold the trophy when the game was over? We probably would think those players had missed the point of why they were there.

The disciples have been criticized in the same way. Sometimes they seemed slow to grasp what Jesus said. We heard this in today's reading. But to be fair, the disciples were at a disadvantage. They were there at the beginning, without the benefit of hindsight, when the foundations of Christianity were being revealed. And Jesus' ministry was unlike anything the world had ever seen. It is not surprising that they did not always understand what they witnessed. The players in the locker room, however, would have been taught about teamwork from an early age.

III.

But, back to the reading. What did Jesus do with the disciples? He told them that if they wanted to be first they must be last and the servant of all. And he used a child as an example to make his point. He said they must receive him as they would receive a child.

How are we supposed to understand this? Sometimes our readings are straightforward. At times Jesus speaks basic truths whose meanings are clear, such as the commandments to love God and love our neighbors. Sermons on those readings can be easy. To use a modern cliché, it might be so easy a caveman could do it.

Other sermons are more difficult, like today. It becomes important to realize that Jesus speaks to us across the centuries, from a different culture and society, and he uses examples and illustrations that people in that time and place would understand, but that are a little strange to us now. We have to figure it out.

So what could he have meant when he said that to be first we must be last? For openers, it would be a mistake to engage in simplistic moralizing about the this reading. At a superficial level it is possible to say there are two choices; first and last, master and servant. It's either black or white, so to speak.

But the problem with looking at things in black and white is that Jesus spoke in technicolor. This means we are called to look at context and setting in order to understand the tones and tints and shades of his meaning. Sometimes he used in metaphors. Other times he used images or words we would not have chosen.

This also can explain why Jesus brought a child into the picture. Today we regard childhood as an important time when we teach our children and guide them in experiencing life. We try to show them that they are important parts of our families and have identities within society.

It was different in Jesus' time. Children had no status at all, and no role in society. They had to stay with their mothers until they could become useful. Children at most were treated as sources of free labor, and were not symbols of anything important. Yet Jesus identified with a child.

IV.

So, let's try to pull these ideas together. It's important to note that Jesus did not tell the disciples that they should not seek success. He did not criticize accomplishment. He did not condemn ambition or a desire to achieve. My earlier example of Mother Theresa and Henry Kissinger illustrates that point. From vastly different backgrounds they both served humanity.

Therefore it seems that Jesus simply redefined concepts of greatness and priorities. He did not literally mean that we must be last as that term is commonly understood in today's vernacular. What if we go to a college football game and hear people shouting "We're number one!"?

Would Jesus criticize that? Would he say that in order to be a good football team you must be last? Of course not.

In the same way, Olympic athletes train rigorously for years for the momentary privilege of standing on the top platform and receiving medals that proclaim they are, in fact, the greatest. I do not believe Jesus was condemning that when he spoke to the disciples.

And when a student takes a college admissions test, the idea is to score as high as possible; to get a better grade than others. Even in seminary there was pressure and competition to get good grades. No one wanted to be last in the class.

And so Jesus was talking about a different kind of first, and a different kind of last. He was telling the disciples that what it takes to be great in God's kingdom is different from what it takes to be great in the world. They had to stop thinking about just their own personal ideas of power and authority, and also focus on serving God's people. And the example of the child showed that even someone of no status or significance is equal to others in God's kingdom.

These are the priorities Jesus had in mind. It's an idea echoed by St. Paul in his letter to the Philippians. He said, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others [to be] better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others" (2:3-5, NIV).

As a result, when Jesus spoke of being first and last, and of being a servant, he did not call us to give up our desires to be happy, or our ambitions, or our hopes to be successful. We are just called to place them in a godly perspective, and then to act accordingly.

V.

And so, the bottom line is that God has given us our lives as his gift, and he wants us to make something good of ourselves. And to do that, we are expected to give back, to place ourselves in service to others, and to share from the blessings we have received.

But if we always focus on ourselves, if our priorities are only ourselves and making ourselves first, then we truly will miss the blessing of serving others. If we think only of our own greatness, we will not see the greatness in others.

If, however, we do put others first, then we live into today's gospel. Being last in this sense means not putting ourselves first. It means thinking of others in the same way as we think of ourselves. It is the Golden Rule. "Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Lk. 6:31). If we look for guidance from the Holy Spirit, and if we prayerfully consider how we are called to live our lives, we will find peace and success, and we will bring that peace to others.

And it isn't that hard. I think we do it a lot here at St. Thomas. It's just a comforting or kind word to someone who is worried or anxious. It's help to those who are ill or infirm, such as we see from our Samaritan Guild and its ministries. And even when we all are healthy and happy, it means that we still think of others.

Doing things God's way rather than our way is the crux of today's lesson. If we think about those who have less rather than those who have more, those who are suffering when we are not, then we can see their needs in the context of our own blessings.

This can lead us to the compassion inherent in Jesus' teaching, and then we will indeed be first because we have chosen to care for others. And we will find that God's goodness and love will do more for us than we could ever do for ourselves. *Amen.*