

Christian, Strive to Be Last

- I. Jesus displayed that attitude in his life
- II. His followers reflect that attitude in our lives

<sup>30</sup>They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, <sup>31</sup>because he was teaching his disciples. He said to them, “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.” <sup>32</sup>But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.

<sup>33</sup>They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the road?” <sup>34</sup>But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.

<sup>35</sup>Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, “Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.”

<sup>36</sup>He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, <sup>37</sup>“Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.”

Tell me, what would you think if before the season began, Coach LaFleur came right out and said, “Our goal as the Green Bay Packers football team is to finish last in our division. That's what we're striving for, to end up behind everybody else.” You'd say, that's crazy talk. What athletic team sets its sights on being last? The same is true for political candidates. Can you imagine Donald Trump saying, “I'm committed to being the second-best candidate in this election?” Can you imagine Olympic athletes celebrating that they didn't have to climb up on the podium to have a medal hung around their neck? No, deep down, everyone wants to win. It's why we compete. It's why we train. In the end, we don't want to end up on the bottom. We want to end up on top. The question is, on top of what? What do we want to be best at? Of course, our sinful nature wants us to be best at a lot of things that aren't so good. You know, best at winning the argument, or best at putting other people down, or best at acquiring the things of this world. But as Christians, God gives us a little different perspective on what we should be striving for. Here in our text for today Jesus says that *anyone who wants to be first must be the very last*. In other words, rather than striving to be first all the time, we should do the opposite. We should strive to be...last. In fact, that's our theme for today:

Christian, Strive to be Last

As we look at this portion of Scripture, we'll see that

- I. Jesus displayed that attitude in his life, and
- II. Jesus' followers reflect it in theirs

Our text for today finds Jesus traveling through Galilee with his disciples. Jesus said recently come down off the mountain of transfiguration, where he had revealed his glory to three of his disciples, and now he was beginning to teach his disciples what he was going to have to endure in the future. Jesus speaks very bluntly to them, “*The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him and after three days he will rise.*” (Mark 9:31)

How did his disciples respond to that announcement? Mark tells us, *They did not*

*understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it. (Mark 9:32). Or maybe more likely, they didn't want to understand. They couldn't fathom the idea that the Son of God, the one who had shown his divine power and might on multiple occasions—they couldn't fathom that that God was going to be taken captive and killed at the hands of his enemies. More than that, they couldn't fathom that his death would mean for them. Think about it. At this point in time, the disciples were kind of riding a wave of Jesus' popularity. They probably felt like they'd hitched their cart to a real "winner". From now on, things were only going to get better for them. What they didn't fully realize is that the only way that Jesus was going to be declared the winner of the war, was by willingly surrendering his life. But that's what Jesus knew he had to do. Jesus knew that if he was going to rescue a fallen human race from sin and hell forever, he would have to set aside his glory and, in effect, "move to the end of the line." Isn't that what St. Paul said about Jesus in Philippians, chapter 2? *Christ Jesus, who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.<sup>a</sup> And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:6-8)**

You want to talk about moving from a position of power and authority to a position of humble service, all to meet the needs of helpless sinners like you and me, there it is. It's the same humble spirit that Jesus showed when even though he was Lord of the Passover meal, he still got down on his hands and knees and washed the disciples' feet. It's the same spirit that Jesus displayed on the cross when he said, "It is finished." It's all in fulfillment of Jesus' words in Mark 10:45, *"The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*

Now one might think that after Jesus dropped this bombshell about his upcoming death and resurrection, his disciples would spend the rest of their journey chewing on what Jesus had just told them. Maybe debating back and forth. I mean, this seemed like a pretty important piece of information that Jesus had shared with them. But no, they had something more important on their minds. In fact they were even arguing about it. Mark tells us, *[Jesus and his disciples] came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?"* Mark relays their answer: *They kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. (Mark 9:33-34)* That is, who of the disciples was the greatest.

Can you imagine how those disciples must have felt? It was like, "Busted!" Kind of reminds me of when I was a kid camped out in a tent in my backyard with my buddy and we were talking about things that we shouldn't be talking about, when suddenly we hear my dad's voice outside the tent, saying, "How are you kids doing in there?" "Uh oh, did he just hear what we were talking about? That would not be good!" Don't you think that's how the disciples felt as they realized that they had been arguing about how great they were even as Jesus was preparing to make the ultimate sacrifice for them? Talk about misplaced priorities on the part of those disciples! But you can understand why this could happen. Each one of those followers of Jesus still had a sinful nature that continued to insist, "Me first!" Even though they were incredibly blessed to walk and talk with the Son of God for 3 years, they still found reason to be jealous of one another. Each one was trying to, in effect, push to the head of the line. They all wanted to be #1.

But tell me, are they the only ones guilty of that sin of pride and self-promotion? Could we maybe fall victim to the very same thing? Now, understand, to be guilty of this sin doesn't mean we have to walk around like Muhammad Ali saying, "I am the greatest!" No, chances are,

our actions are a bit more subtle. Maybe we go around telling people how busy we are, thereby implying that we are working harder than everyone else, or that we are indispensable, because everybody wants us, everybody needs us. Or maybe we kind of push ourselves to the front of the line, assuming that the way we think is better than the way anybody else thinks. Or we do more talking than listening. Or we're more concerned about how other people feel about us than how we feel about them. Or we use our position or our influence or our charm to ultimately get what we want.

These are all things that happen when we strive to be first, first according to the way our sinful nature thinks, or great in the eyes of the world. But here in our text, Jesus goes on to explain that there is a different kind of greatness, a greatness that is not an expression of pride, but rather an expression of humility. Jesus says to his disciples then and now, *"Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all."* (Mark 9:35)

I don't know about you, but I find that to be a very interesting statement. It's like it's a paradox. In effect, Jesus is saying, "It's not wrong to want to be first. You should strive to be the best person you can be. But here's what you should strive to be the best at. You should strive to be first...at being last. In other words, you should work hard to make sure that other people are ahead of you. Make sure that their voices are being heard, their needs are being met, they are sitting in the seat of honor.

Kind of reminds me of the parable that Jesus told about picking seats at the wedding banquet. Remember Jesus' words? Jesus said, *"When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, 'Give this person your seat.' Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, 'Friend, move up to a better place.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all the other guests. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."* (Luke 14:8-11).

Did you know that for years that parable bothered me? You know why? Well, some of you know that when the Ladies Aid puts on a funeral luncheon in our Commons, they always have the immediate family sit at the head table in kind of a position of honor. And then at the end of the table, they put a little sign that says "Pastor" And that's where the pastor's supposed to sit. And every time I see that card, I think of this parable, and I wonder, "Should I really be sitting here? Wouldn't it be better if I, like, go to the end of the line? Wouldn't that be the more humble thing to do?"

But you know, over the course of time, I've concluded that it's not wrong for me to sit in that seat, for two reasons. Number one because I didn't choose that seat for myself. Someone else chose it for me. Personally I'd probably prefer to sit in the back. But the Ladies Aid—the ones who are kind of in charge of the banquet, kind of like in Jesus' parable—they are the ones who said, "Pastor, please come up and sit here." So in deference to them, I've learned to take my place at this head of the table.

But there's an even more important reason why I sit where I do at a funeral dinner. It's because of what Jesus says here in our text. *"Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last and the servant of all."* There's the key. No matter what position we are in, no matter whether we're at the head of the line or the end of the line, our purpose is the same. And that is to serve the needs of others. As a pastor, my service to the family doesn't end when I say "Amen" at the end of the worship service. It continues as I sit beside the grieving spouse, as we break bread

together, as we share stories of the grace that God showed their loved one. That seat at the table gives me the opportunity to minister to them, yes, to serve them, because that's what the word minister means. It means "servant".

But you realize, that's true for more than just called ministers of the gospel. It's true for every believer in Christ. Jesus calls us to, as St Paul put it, *serve one another humbly in love. (Galatians 5:13)* And as an illustration of what that humble service might look like, what does Jesus do with his disciples? He takes a little child in his arms and he says, "*Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me.*" (Mark 9:37)

Why does Jesus pick a little child? Well, I can think of at least two reasons. First, because little children need help. They need someone who is bigger than they are, someone who's in a position of authority, someone who can use that authority, in love, to bend down and wipe their runny nose or change their dirty diapers or put their shoes on again. Let's face it, there's not a lot of glory in those kinds of tasks. It's not like we're serving as bodyguard for the president of the United States. No, we're like wiping jelly off sticky little fingers for the umpteenth time. But, we're serving.

And we're serving without any expectation of compensation or reward. Have you ever heard of a 3-year-old saying, "Mom, will you flip your iPad around so that I can add a little gratuity for the meal you just served me?" No, a lot of our service to children goes completely unnoticed and often unappreciated. I mean as far as I know, nobody is carrying our Sunday school teachers on their shoulders saying, "Way to teach those little ones!"

And that's okay. Because in the end, we're not serving to get something. We're serving because we've received something. Jesus has given us his life to set us free from the obligations of the law. We don't have to do anything to earn God's favor, or to know that we're loved by God. We have it all in Christ. And that fact is what gives us the freedom to say not "Me first," but rather, "You first, and you and you, and you." In fact, as followers of our Savior, our attitude is "Let me be the very last. Let me be the servant of all." For in that way, our humble service is a reflection of the humble service that Jesus rendered to us first. To him be the glory. Amen.