

Mark 9:30-37

A WORD TO THE WISE

One night during his televised show, comedian Johnny Carson asked the audience if anyone knew the definition of the word *chutzpah*. Ed McMahan, Johnny's faithful sidekick and ever-present straight-man, replied, "No, what is the definition of *chutzpah*?" Johnny said, "Chutzpah is when a man kills both his father and his mother and then throws himself on the mercy of the court because he is an orphan. That's *chutzpah*!"

The word *chutzpah*, which is a Hebrew word meaning shameless audacity or impudence, came to mind when I read the Gospel lesson for this morning. Did you hear the great irony in this passage from Mark's gospel? For the second time, Jesus has told his disciples about his suffering, subsequent death, and resurrection, which would take place soon after they reached Jerusalem. What happens next is "sheer *chutzpah*!" Along the way, the disciples began to argue with one another as to who was the greatest.

What a disconnect from all that Jesus had just shared with the disciples in terms of his upcoming suffering and sacrificial death. The disciples reacted to this disconcerting announcement by wondering which one of them was the greatest disciple. Most likely, what was at the root of the disciples' senseless debate was the expectation that the one who was the greatest would receive the most love and attention from Jesus.

It's important to note in the text that Jesus didn't berate his disciples for their topic of conversation. And, it should certainly be pointed out that there is nothing wrong with giving one's all and trying to be the best or the greatest in various endeavors. We are encouraged to grow in our unique skills and to develop our personal gifts to the very best of our abilities. We are called to be and to do our very best as a musician, teacher, student, businessperson, athlete, homemaker, volunteer, and so on.

However, when it comes to living as a disciple of Jesus Christ, what the world values or deems is the best or the greatest simply doesn't measure up within the kingdom of God. Worldly values are flipped upside down so that, in the words of Jesus, true greatness consists of "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Here's a word to the wise: God takes notice of those who renounce self-centeredness and embrace the role of a servant - that's what catches God's eye; that's what God deems to be the best. This is no abstract theory about humility and service. After all, Jesus himself was on the way to the cross. So, following Christ means laying down one's life for the sake of others - either literally or figuratively.

Then, Jesus brought a child into their midst and said, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name, welcomes me... and the one who sent me. Children of that era were not valued as much as they are now. Children had no rights; they were dependent, helpless, and nonproductive. Also, the child represents all people who are vulnerable or powerless, who have low economic and social standing. While society might disregard or marginalize the poor, in God's kingdom, Jesus' true disciples serve others who have no power or resources, who have no advocates to stand with them. But, here's a word to the wise: when we welcome them, we also welcome Jesus and God the Father who sent him. True greatness means serving and seeing to the least of these.

When St. Paul's School of Theology in Kansas City, MO was seeking the right individual to become the president of that institution, a search committee was appointed.

They began to sort through all kinds of resumes. In time, one name emerged above all the rest. The committee traveled to the state in which the candidate resided and they visited the church where he served as pastor. Their interview with him confirmed what they already knew to be true. This particular minister's credentials were outstanding. There was no need to spend a great deal of time with him just to satisfy perfunctory paper shuffling. So they decided to make a rather novel inquiry. They visited with the church custodian. Dr. William MacElvaney became the president of St. Paul's School of Theology on the strength of his outstanding credentials along with the unreserved recommendation of the church custodian.

Sergius was a Russian, born in the 1300's. He went to school, but he was not a great student. Somehow, Sergius made it through school and entered a monastery. From there, he forsook all earthly goods and went off by himself to a place deep in the forest of Siberia, where he built a hut and lived as a hermit. There was a radiant peace about Sergius, which drew people to his hermitage for counsel and friendship. Twice, he was asked to move to Moscow and become abbot of the monastery there. Twice, he refused; he wasn't attracted by the status of the position. Finally, the Church ordered him to assume it! In Moscow, he became widely known as a peacemaker to whom princes came and before whom armies bowed. He is often credited with uniting the diverse peoples of the huge Russian territory.

Sergius never preached an eloquent sermon. He never authored a book. In fact, he didn't leave even a single, memorable letter. But he accomplished wonderful things because he knew how to die to self in order to serve others. His ambitions were to serve Christ and the children of God. He was free! Free to be caring instead of competitive, sharing instead of self-absorbed.

Late in life, Sergius was asked to become Metropolitan of the Russian Orthodox Church. But when the golden pectoral cross-studded with precious jewels was placed around his neck, Sergius refused it. "I cannot wear this cross of glory," he said. "From my youth, I have not liked gold and I wish to remain poor in my old age." For the sake of discipleship, Sergius declined the highest office in the Church! Here was a man who could not be bought! Here was a man after Jesus' own heart. And, here is a man whose example can guide our hearts to Christ. (David Van Kley, *Lectionary Homiletics*, September 2003, pp. 60 and 62)

Here's a word to the wise and to those who aspire to be the greatest of all: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." As we minister to children and serve the needy, we will also welcome Jesus. And, that will be the greatest reward of all – given and received - to the glory of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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