

The Twelve | Enrolled in the School of Jesus (B)

As This Little Child

Matthew 18.1-14; Mark 9.31-35

March 8, 2020

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and said, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"² And He called a child to Himself and set him before them,³ and said, "Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.⁴ "Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.⁵ "And whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me;⁶ but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.⁷ "Woe to the world because of its stumbling blocks! For it is inevitable that stumbling blocks come; but woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes!⁸ "If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; it is better for you to enter life crippled or lame, than to have two hands or two feet and be cast into the eternal fire.⁹ "If your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out and throw it from you. It is better for you to enter life with one eye, than to have two eyes and be cast into the fiery hell.

¹⁰ "See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that their angels in heaven continually see the face of My Father who is in heaven.¹¹ "For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost.¹² "What do you think? If any man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go and search for the one that is straying?¹³ "If it turns out that he finds it, truly I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine which have not gone astray.¹⁴ "So it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones perish.

(Mark 9.31-35) *For He was teaching His disciples and telling them, "The Son of Man is to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill Him; and when He has been killed, He will rise three days later."³² But they did not understand this statement, and they were afraid to ask Him.³³ They came to Capernaum; and when He was in the house, He began to question them, "What were you discussing on the way?"³⁴ But they kept silent, for on the way they had discussed with one another which of them was the greatest.³⁵ Sitting down, He called the twelve and said to them, "If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all."*

We've been watching Jesus Christ shaping the characters of His twelve disciples. He's been mentoring them and training them to be ambassadors in His administration – ambassadors of the Kingdom of God. When He finally departs from them (physically) and the Spirit of God empowers them – the Twelve will be thoroughly trained and equipped to carry on the work.

Today there are 2¼ billion professing Christians, so, whatever you might say about Him, Jesus Christ's training program was second to none.

Today's passage shows us that the raw-materials with which Jesus is working are pretty RAW: some very raw, raw-materials. The disciples sort of tip their hand to show that they still don't get it. They're embarrassingly clueless and even opposed to the basic principles of His Way.

Passing through Galilee and heading to Jerusalem, Jesus has completed Lesson ONE ("who do you say that I am?") and His next focus is, "Yes, I AM the Messiah and LESSON TWO: I will die for the sins of My people – first the Cross and then the Crown – first the Thorns and then the Throne."

But here Jesus meets with this "Proto-Problem" that all people want to be first. It's not the way God made us but the Fall – the entrance of sin into the world and into our motives has made us all what Augustine and Luther said: "en curvatus en se" ("curved IN on our selves") And this drive to be "#1", to be most important, is keeping the disciples from learning Lesson TWO (each notice meets with "Huh?").

And you see how really STRONG this pursuit/drive IS as Jesus announces yet again in the second reading finds them NOT only failing to grasp what He's saying but then whispering among themselves, "Hey, who do you think is the best disciple?"

He just announced AGAIN that He, the Messiah, was going to die – the One they've seen as the Last Adam and the King of Creation (all forces submit to Him) and He said AGAIN that He would die... and they either think He's speaking in riddles or maybe wondering who would replace Him...and He calls them on it. "Hey, what were you guys talking about back there?"

Did your teacher ever say, "Uh, excuse me, Mr. Campo, why are you talking? Is that something you'd like to share with the whole class...I'm sure we'd all like to know!... Mr. Campo do you even know the name of this class?"

"But they kept silent, for on the way they had discussed with one another which of them was the greatest..." -- They should have been riveted and fixated on this devastating news: "The Son of Man is to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill Him; and when He has been killed, He will rise three days later."

What would YOU say if I friend told you he was about to die? They somehow see this as an opportunity for personal advancement and gaining position and status. That consideration takes precedence over everything else.

We can only conclude that if these young men are a cross-section of humanity – that humanity must be utterly fixated on being FIRST (it's the proto pursuit!)

I know we want to say that these guys must've been extra dense... and that "if I were there, I would've been much more spiritually sensitive/loving!" BUT MAYBE NOT... maybe we are just as laughable as they were. Put you or me in the same situation and who knows? My guess is we'd be more subtle/slippery and sophisticated (we'd LOOK more humble and concerned – we THINK!) but maybe we just don't know ourselves very well... maybe OUR nature is just like theirs.

We see a chore (at home or work) that has to be done... but we walk by it and leave it for the next person. It's a way of saying, "That's below me."

We curate our appearance – wearing certain clothes with the right branding so it puts us in the inner ring, the "in group" (the worthies) or by music or movies or literature or travel we hope to subtly let people know that, "I'm more impressive than you think I am and I have superior tastes and I'm kind of ELITE."

Or a fashionable kind of snobbishness or just some vaguely superior look of disapproval. And of course this whole "proto-pursuit" (desire to be first) has gotten institutionalized and accepted in what some social scientists have recognized as "the duty-to-self ethic" – Is it valid "self-care" or is it the proto-pursuit? It's not always easy to tell – in part because we don't know ourselves and don't see ourselves as we really are.

It could be an air of reserve – not entering in to a conversation/social situation because I might look foolish (do you do karaoke? Why NOT...or WHY?) It could be that I'd just like to be left alone OR (conversely) that I dominate conversations always hoping to show how witty I am.

OR I get jealous when someone else is recognized and I may even ask people, "Can you believe SHE got the promotion!?" (when jealousy turns to envy and envy turns to character assassination...) OR just simply failing to see people and look them in the eye like the cashier is only an extension of the cash register.

And while this proto-pursuit can be expressed in a million ways – our subtle arrogance and self-obsession and superiority complex (OR inferiority complex that keeps me constantly focused on ME and how other people are probably judging me) BUT the point is: WE, like the disciples, – we rarely SEE it in ourselves and even when we do we rarely OWN IT: v. 34, "they kept silent..."

And then Jesus Christ shows them that all our subtle moves and efforts at self-promotion really don't even work. In fact, UNLESS we come to see and appreciate an essential paradox, our greatness will be a self-delusion. "If anyone wants to be first, he must be last of all" AND "Unless you are converted and become like children, you will not even enter the Kingdom of heaven..."

A paradox is a seeming contradiction that IN FACT communicates a truth. The way UP is down. The way to reach the heights is to lower yourself.

Jesus Christ insists on this paradox repeatedly. In His Administration the mourners are the ones who are happy. The morally bankrupt are given the Kingdom. The weak are strong. We only FIND our lives by giving them away and on and on and on!

His Kingdom is the antithesis to traditional religion AND the antithesis to secular non-religion.

The way He illustrates it is by calling a child.

In that culture, children were burdens. Children were “nobodies” who had nothing to offer. Maybe today, Jesus would say, “Unless you become like a nursing-home resident you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven.” He’s thinking of someone who can make NO CONTRIBUTION, has no status, no social standing.

“To become a nobody and to welcome a NOBODY – to receive and embrace and to VALUE someone who can’t advance your career or social status simply because of Jesus Christ i.e. in the Name of Jesus Christ – that’s what THIS PARADOX looks like.

There are two people in a room when you enter – one is important and good looking and cool and wealthy and the other is a nobody and simply because of Jesus Christ you see only two people and you care NOTHING for how either one can/will benefit you in any way... You don’t calculate.

And because this is so apparently absurd and so counter to the way things work here on this fallen planet, so OPPOSITE TO THE BASIC POWER DRIVE in us, the WAY this paradoxical way is internalized... is by simply hearing the NEWS the disciples keep ignoring i.e. that Jesus Christ has come to live and die and rise again for His disciples. “Listen to Him!”

The only way we can get liberated from our PROTO-pursuit is by seeing that "The Son of Man is to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill Him; and when He has been killed, He will rise three days later." This announcement they thought was nonsense and some sort of mystical puzzle IS THE KEY TO GETTING THAT CONVERSION THAT MAKES YOU CHILDLIKE and liberated from using people to make you feel important and significant and FIRST.

They were overlooking the very remedy to their own disease. But later, when these young men saw it happen – that the beautiful, self-forgetful, obedient, servant-life of Jesus was LIVED FOR THEM (His obedience is credited to me!) when they saw Him die under the sentence that THEY rightly deserved it would begin to break their people-approval addiction.

They could start ignoring what people could do for them – stop looking to important “connections” to make them feel important.

The quest to be recognized is now unnecessary because I have ALL THE RECOGNITION I COULD EVER WANT OR NEED – in Jesus Christ, God has come for me. Jesus Christ lived the life I failed to live and died the death I deserved to die. Because He was pure and good and sinless – death could not HOLD HIM and His resurrection proves that I am accepted – the sacrifice is accepted; my debt is paid.

I can stop trying to look important so that important and beautiful, well-connected people can applaud me – I have the applause of Heaven. And when I am believing this and it's vivid and real to me THEN everyone is extremely special to me – NOT for what they can do for me but because they are made in the image of God – their angels stand in the presence of God (v.10) and behold God's face. AND IF GOD HIMSELF counts them important then so MUST I!

And this applies not only to people who can do something for me (the rich, beautiful and famous) but also the poor, disabled and plain – in fact especially them... because... I AM THEM.

I feel a special kinship with the needy because I see myself IN THEIR CATEGORY! They help me define my own self-image. That's how to PRACTICE this paradox.

See it often helps to ask yourself – “Where do I see my self in this passage?” For instance, in the Good Samaritan – you have to see that you're not the priest or Levite who passed on the other side OR THE GOOD SAMARITAN – you're the man in the ditch!

In THIS section you're NOT simply the NOBODY – the children or nursing home residents who have nothing to give... If you see yourself accurately – if your self-image is clear/true you'll see: NOT ONLY AM I A NOBODY who has nothing that God needs... I'M THE SHEEP v.12 WHO HAS GONE ASTRAY.

In other words – I'm not simply a unprofitable child or a nursing home resident – I AM THE SHEEP WHO STRAYS AND COSTS THE SHEPHERD – I'm a rebel from the Kingdom and by my own active straying (“all we like sheep have gone astray”) by my own disobedience and selfishness I've strayed and the Good Shepherd had to leave Heaven – leave the 99 to come get me. I'm a rebel – much worse than a nobody so how could I look down on ANYBODY?!

This is NOT how I become a Christian but it IS how Christians become! And when I act arrogantly and look down on anyone – the remedy is NOT to say, “Ugh! I have to try a lot harder to be humble!”

The key is to come again and accurately see God in Jesus Christ and His self-sacrificing love for nobodies and even for rebels and strays and THEN TO ACCURATELY SEE YOURSELF – that I AM that straying rebel (I'm worse than I know) but the King of Love left Heaven to search for me and find... and find me He did.

If we can – by faith and in the power of God’s Spirit – if we will answer that QUESTION (Who do you think you ARE?!) and see ourselves as needy children and nobodies...and as sinners in need of redemption AND AS THE BELOVED SHEEP JESUS CAME TO SAVE, as the cherished children chosen and secure in the Father’s love – then we will not give secular people reason to hate God – we may even be used as lovers of the loveless and midwives bringing new children into the Kingdom!