

First is Last and Least is First 2021
 Psalm 33:13-22 Mark 10:31-44

Psalm 33:13-22 (New Revised Standard Version)

The Lord looks down from heaven; he sees all humankind. From where he sits enthroned he watches all the inhabitants of the earth— he who fashions the hearts of them all, and observes all their deeds. A king is not saved by his great army; a warrior is not delivered by his great strength. The war horse is a vain hope for victory, and by its great might it cannot save. Truly the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love, to deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine. Our soul waits for the Lord; he is our help and shield. Our heart is glad in him, because we trust in his holy name. Let your steadfast love, O Lord, be upon us, even as we hope in you.

Mark 10:31-44 (New Revised Standard Version)

“But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.” They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.”

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” And he said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?” And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” They replied, “We are able.” Then Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.”

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.

Last week I heard something most extraordinary
 in a sermon at our Presbytery's 1st annual pastors' retreat,
 something that I don't think I've ever heard a pastor say before.
 the sermon he was preaching,

In fact during

the pastor said it twice, **“But I was wrong!”**

Several years ago
 there was a very difficult, contentious and divisive issue
 that led to considerable conflict, anger and bitterness
 among the leaders of our Presbytery of Sierra Blanca.

The man preaching had taken a very strong and determined stand,
 and was adamant that there was absolutely no possible way

the proposed changes in Presbytery structure could work.

Years have passed since all that conflict, and that same pastor returned recently to serve another church in our Presbytery, and he recognized **how well the changes he opposed are working.**

At the retreat he had the courage, strength and integrity to say in his sermon, "But I was wrong!" ... **and that sort of honesty and character, we don't hear very often.**

It was a bold and powerful way to move toward reconciliation, and the restoration of peace, trust and relationship --- **- to step back & let someone else be right, let someone else be first.**

And what an amazing and vivid contrast to our world and culture of always "me-first" and "win-at-any-cost" ways of thinking. The Mark 10 passage we read is framed by vs. 31 & 44, in which Jesus describes living into the Kingdom of God.

... many who are first will be last, and the last will be first. ... whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.

Throughout our culture, in politics, clubs, media and even church people play silly self-esteem, ego, power and authority games for prominence, attention, recognition or to feel in control,

trying to be first, to impose their will, desires & opinions, to protect their sense of turf, to have it their own way, or to make themselves look better than someone else, **even when it damages and disrupts accomplishing the work together.**

Many of our most basic motivations and much of what we say and do, are really about feeding our ego, self-esteem & desire to control, **and most of us have a great deal of trouble seeing beyond the horizon of our own self-perspective and desires.**

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Now wanting to achieve our best and most excellent is not wrong, or for our lives to matter, to have a sense of worth and meaning. But to focus on our own self and our agenda **can be destructive if it comes at the cost of community and mutual relationships.**

Consider for example, the dismal condition of politics these days, in which polarized leaders all across the political spectrum, seem to prefer making political gain & points for their party over meeting the needs and welfare of our nation as a whole... **... willing to manipulate to win at any price, no matter who gets hurt.**

It's not that ambition is all wrong, for it can usefully motivate us to work harder, make more effort, try again or look for a better way. **But corrupted** it can become self-serving and destructive causing us to miss the point— **the glory and purpose of God.**

The Church is a community of Christ's blessed and beloved people, **a grace-defined alternative** to culture's defective perspective... **...for to live in Christ is to restrain my selfishness, which is the message Jesus is teaching in Mark.**

Jesus has for the third time described what lies ahead for him, the suffering and terrible death he will endure in Jerusalem,

but then he promises them, vs. 34, "and after three days I will rise again."

That is also our hope, not that we avoid life's trials and troubles,
but that God is present working in us, leading and sustaining us,
and we will be raised to glory in the end, just as he promised.

**Meanwhile, we are called to serve and be a faithful community,
that helps each one grow toward their best as God intends
through authentic relationships with God and neighbor.**

The challenge is that sometimes, distracted by world and culture,
we diminish the image of God within us by failing to see it in others,
by selling out and compromising for self-esteem and ego,
for short term gains like having our way or being first.

The text makes it clear that the disciples really didn't get it,
but were still mired in this world's values and perspective,
as James and John pull Jesus aside
and try to arrange for their own places of honor and status,
finagling for a position ahead of the other disciples.

They envision positions of honor and pre-eminence in glory, vs. 37
And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."

Apparently, even walking in the very presence of Jesus Christ,
is not always enough **to keep ego-driven selfish ambition at bay.**

We might expect that Jesus would be upset by this & slap them down
for the selfish and presumptive arrogance of their request.
But rather than responding with frustration or anger toward them
Jesus answers with graceful gentleness and patience,
and turns the situation around into an opportunity to teach
by calling them to a much deeper and more authentic faith.

Of course the other disciples
are then angry and offended by James' and John's request,
- not that they are any less selfish or driven, but perhaps because
they didn't think to call, "shotgun", before James and John.

The way Jesus answers them goes deeper than their request,
and after his resurrection and Pentecost, they will understand
that they were in pursuit of the wrong goal vs. 38, 44

But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? ... whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.

As Jesus points out, that as they would realize later on,
they did not understand what they were actually asking for.

Ironically what James and John, and the disciples did not envision,
was that the ones who would end up on Jesus' right and left,
**would be the ones hanging on crosses beside him
as Jesus was raised up on the cross into glory...**
... **probably not the positions of status that they had in mind.**

Jesus continues the lesson by pointing out
that they did know what it is to be ground down by ruling gentiles,
by Rome's crushing quest for more wealth, power and authority.

They have felt what it was like under the heel of Roman occupation.

And the message of grace, joy, peace and hope that Jesus brought was,
it's not going to be like that, it's not to be that way among us.

**You are far more loved and precious to the Lord than that,
for you have been blessed and redefined by the God's grace.**

Now it is fine and appropriate to strive worthily for excellence.

And Jesus is not against high ambition, goals and aspirations,
**for indeed mediocrity, lazy and comfortable complacency
are not a part the faithful discipleship Jesus desires.**

Jesus wants us to shift toward a more appropriate target than self,
God's will and glory rather than human ego and selfish pride.

**And as we draw nearer toward the Lord, we become more able
to live generous and compassionate lives, as God intends.**

**In fact, the point is to become the person God intends for us to be
by bringing our best gifts & blessings to serve in God's Kingdom.**

The letters of the word 'joy' provide the right order of priority ---

- **J** as in **J**esus, **O** as in **O**thers, and **Y** as in **Y**ourself... **J O Y!**

Rather than an "I want and I desire" consumer-driven spirituality,
we are called to humble, gracious and generous participation
in a servant-oriented and cross-bearing faith community,
where **self-less-ness** supersedes our **self-ish-ness**.

One a time when Mother Theresa
was showing a reporter around her mission and compassion-ministry,
and seeing all the filth, suffering, disease and poverty,
the reporter remarked, "I wouldn't do this for a million dollars."

To which she replied,

"Neither would I. But I will gratefully and eagerly do it for Jesus Christ."

She was a woman of joy, Jesus^{1st}, Others^{2nd}, and finally yourself.

Following the model and example of Jesus Christ,
the glory, healing-purpose, will of God and to serve usefully
these become our highest priority & mission as we strive
to reflect God's grace and compassion toward others...

... and the reason that we can, **and we are able accomplish that shift,**
is because of the power of the gift of God's gracious love,
by which we are transformed, as we are already assured
of our welcome and true home within God's kingdom...

... and knowing that nothing that we can ever accomplish in life
will even come close to that which we have already been given,
God's saving grace, that Jesus accomplished on the cross,
**and the Spirit's work done through our lives
often without us even knowing or being aware.**

When I was in 8th grade our family moved to the Washington DC area.
We joined a church with a pastor I grew to admire very much,
and whose example I've tried to follow in my own ministry.

Before Covid hit, I happened to sit next to a pastor in a meeting
who was just arriving to serve a church in our Presbytery ...
... who turned out to be the daughter of that same pastor now retired.

This last year things have not worked out well for her,
and she is leaving to serve another church elsewhere.

In my sense of disappointment I wondered and questioned,
why she was ever here to serve for such a short time?,
and what could God possibly have been up to in this?

She'd told me that her father was feeling discouraged and doubting
that for all his years of ministry he'd really made any difference.

In his retirement he was questioning and distressing,
was there anything lasting to show for his life of ministry?

When she told him what I'd said about his influence in my life,
how his example of ministry had guided my faith & pastorate,
they were just the words of hope he needed to hear...

... maybe she came here for God to encourage his discouraged retired servant,
and that was a part of God's gracious purpose for her short tenure in NM.

That leads to a challenge and call for us to hear today.

1st, in your own life, who have you seen live out the Gospel,
and who has God placed into your life and experience
who've exemplified that sort of **Christ-like servanthood?**

Start by thanking God for placing them in your life,
and for the gift of their presence and their influence,

and maybe even letting them know.

2nd, consider what qualities made them so special and effective.
How was it that they got your attention and made a difference?

Perhaps it was no more than having a genuine interest in you,
or Christ-like compassion or even the gift of their time,

**and are not those qualities of their life example
the same ones you might want to follow & emulate?**

3rd, and here's where the real challenge starts to kick in ----
whose life are you touching, feeding and influencing today?
Who are you teaching, who are you mentoring & developing?
Who are you bringing into Christ's presence and hope?

Our call is to a true greatness through faithful servanthood,
and regardless of our background, our circumstance,
our resources or education, **and we all can do that.**

**We can all love. We all can reflect God's grace and compassion,
and we all can make a difference toward other individuals.
We can all put the needs and interests of others ahead of our own.**

So, those who follow Jesus Christ, will serve themselves last,
and the needs of others will take precedent over their own...

**... and so we'll be less willing to trade what is significant,
that which is treasure for silly trinkets of this world.**

Just as Jesus explained,

"... whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all."

The apostle Paul urged the same thing in Philippians 2:3-5

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.

Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.
Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.