

It Isn't a Race

³⁰They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; ³¹for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." ³²But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

³³Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" ³⁴But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. ³⁵He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." ³⁶Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Mark 9:30-37

Isn't it just like us to make a competition out of everything?

Some race horses staying in a stable. One of them starts to boast about his track record. "In the last 15 races, I've won 8 of them!"

Another horse breaks in, "Well in the last 27 races, I've won 19!!"

"Oh that's good, but in the last 36 races, I've won 28!", says another, flicking his tail.

At this point, they notice that a greyhound dog has been sitting there listening. "I don't mean to boast," says the greyhound, "but in my last 90 races, I've won 88 of them!"

The horses are clearly amazed. "Wow!" says one, after a hushed silence. "A talking dog."

Jesus is walking home with his disciples; they had been up on the mountain and had witnessed the Transfiguration. They had just suffered a blow to their collective ego when they couldn't cast a demon out of a boy. It seems as though they haven't been able to do much that Jesus is happy with. Maybe they're feeling the frustration of being so very human while following someone who almost seems superhuman—they leave the scene of the boy's healing arguing about which one of them is the greatest.

This really doesn't surprise us. Our culture and our society tend to want to make a competition of everything. The world tells us that if we want to survive, we'd better be the fittest. Even in the church, we see a lot of occasions to set ourselves up in competition with

other Christians. We often feel that we're in competition with other congregations or other denominations—sometimes we may even feel that we're in competition with each other: which of us is most important to the church? Which of us loves God the most? Which of us serves God the best?

It's easy to imagine Jesus rolling his eyes at these disciples; he's trying to tell them what's about to happen. It isn't pleasant, and it isn't easy. Jesus wants them to understand the importance of his mission, and what it's going to mean to the disciples, but as usual, they're clueless. They don't understand what he's trying to tell them, and then they waste their time with this foolish argument about who's the greatest. It must have been very frustrating to the Master for his disciples to be so thick-headed.

Once again, he asks them what they were arguing about, but they didn't answer. Surely it wasn't because they didn't know the answer to the question; it seems very likely that they were embarrassed by the truth. They had been engaged in this little competition, a hearty round of one-upsmanship. Their silence demonstrates that they knew at least that Jesus wouldn't like it, and at most that they knew it was wrong.

I notice that in Mark, the relationship Jesus has with his disciples is a lot like the relationship between a parent and a child. Jesus doesn't mind calling their attention to their own mistakes from time to time. In this case, he doesn't criticize them directly, but instead gives them a lesson in the difference between living under the sovereignty of God and living in the competition-driven world.

“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”

We've heard this often enough that it isn't really easy for us to imagine how it must have sounded the first time. If it were us, sitting at Jesus' feet in Capernaum, we might say, “Sure, sure. First must be last and last must be first.” When the disciples heard it, they must have been dumbfounded. This idea challenged a lot of their assumptions about life. It made no sense: leaders weren't servants; servants aren't leaders.

To illustrate the point, Jesus did something just as shocking: he brought a child into their midst and said, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

This development adds several more layers of surprise. In the ancient near east, children were thought of as having potential value, but not as having much present value. Children were powerless; they were vulnerable. Children were practically invisible. This isn't about children being innocent; this was about children being the lowest in the hierarchy. Children had less social standing than slaves.

It's bad enough that Jesus is chiding them for their conversation along the road; now he's adding insult to injury. Notice what he says: "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me." It isn't some distant, abstract metaphor. It's about current and potential action. It has become a conversation about how to welcome Jesus. He doesn't say, "Welcoming me is, in a way, sort of like welcoming a child." No, the implication is that if they don't welcome the child, they aren't welcoming him. Treat the child as an equal? Become servants in order to be the greatest? Jesus is suggesting something far more than just taking care of the child, more than meeting the child's material needs, more than making sure the child is safe: Jesus is talking about welcoming the child. Welcoming! They may not have understood everything that Jesus was trying to say to them, but they certainly understood enough to feel very, very small.

Then Jesus adds the double-whammy: "...and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." The implication is that Jesus has said something about the nature of God. What has he said? What does it mean?

It means that our striving to be the greatest doesn't have very much to do with the plan God has for reconciling the world to Himself. It means that our part of the mission has more to do with how we treat other human beings than it does with how "successful" we are by earthly standards. It means that we are called to minister with a spirit of humility, not only

because it's what Jesus teaches us, but also because it's characteristic of the God we serve.

Let me say that again, just in case you didn't hear me: the God we serve is willing to be humble.

That's a hard concept to grasp, but there's plenty of evidence for it. Most of us are familiar with the ancient hymn from the very early church that is mentioned in the epistle to the church at Philippi; it's a beautiful piece of verse, and it seems to capture at least a part of what Jesus is trying to communicate in this strange illustration:

⁵Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

⁶Who, being in very nature[a] God,
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,

⁷but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature[b] of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

⁸And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

⁹Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,

¹⁰that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

¹¹and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

God became flesh, the ultimate act of humility. Jesus is telling the disciples, as he is telling us, that the way we would treat children, and by extension, the way we treat those who are without status, those who are vulnerable, those who are at the margins of society, those who have made mistakes, those who have sunk to their lowest, those who have no position and no power—the way we treat our fellow sinners—is a reflection of how we would treat the very one who sent Jesus to be our savior.