

AS A SERVANT

Psalm 1, OT p. 489
James 3:13-4:8a (from *The Message*), NT p.230
Mark 9:30-37, NT p. 45

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24th Sunday in Ordinary Time
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Do you enjoy watching or playing sports? A lot of us do. The baseball season is coming to a close. The Mariners aren't doing so well, but my childhood team, the Detroit Tigers, are at the top of their division. Go Tigers! Football has begun. High school and college teams are geared up for the season, and cross country runners have been practicing up and down Sykes Road. If we're not up to competing ourselves, we get a lot of satisfaction from watching a good team win, and we take it personally if they lose. And if an unknown teen-aged tennis player starts to beat the best players in the world, well, that's the kind of sports story we really like. The spirit of competition seems to be part of our human nature.

Most of the time sports competition is all in good fun, though there are exceptions. When the competition gets rough, when a player feels his or her self-worth and reputation are at stake, when parents start to scream at Little League games, then it gets too serious. In other parts of life – job, family, even traffic – competition can become a real problem, leading to conflict and escalating to possible abuse – remember the reading from James. We see examples around us and have probably experienced some. But what we see is nothing compared to what happens in many cultures around the world where honor is the bedrock value and shame is the absolute worst that can happen. In those cultures, people compete for honor, and sometimes it's deadly serious. That was the world of Jesus and his disciples.

Honor and reputation determined your place in life. The opinion of your family and your neighbors told you who you were. We try to understand the world of the Bible through our personalized, individualized psychology, but people of that time and place weren't

concerned with inner psychology. Every interaction was evaluated on your in-group's opinion as to whether you were gaining or losing some of your honor. I've read the background on the honor-shame culture, and I think I understand some of it, but it still is a very foreign concept. It doesn't feel natural or right to me, because I'm part of a culture where "everyone knows" that personal achievement is more important than who your parents were or how many people owe you favors. Not so in ancient cultures, or in much of the rest of the world today. I think the closest we come is in some small towns or in some extended families, where other people's opinions of you are more important than your own. The value of personal achievement is in the honor it brings to the family. A good example of that honor-shame culture in the Japanese immigrant experience is the Yasui family of Hood River, whose story is told in the book *Stubborn Twig*.¹ The Oregon Library Association highly recommended that all Oregonians read that book. It was an eye-opener for me.

Jesus and the disciples lived in that kind of culture. So when he tried to teach his disciples that he was facing death, they might have wondered who would become their leader. Whose status was greatest in that group of twelve? They discussed it, they **argued** about it on the road. Jesus sat down and as their Teacher, tried to turn their highest cultural value upside down. "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

Their need to compare themselves to one another and determine their status would have to give way to something more important. Jesus used their argument to refocus their

¹Lauren Kessler, *Stubborn Twig*. Corvallis, OR: Oregon State University Press, 2005.

attention and energy away from honor – his death would be most dishonorable. Much of the story of Jesus in the four gospels is an explanation of why anyone would consider following this dishonorable crucified heretic. We're so used to the story, I'm sure we don't really get the scandal behind it. We avoid the Good Friday part of the story, and we sugar-coat the message of sacrifice and disgrace. Jesus confronted his disciples with the prospect on more than one occasion.

If these somewhat clueless disciples were going to be of any use, he needed to focus them away from concern about their own status. In this verse, the word is "servant." In the next chapter, Jesus also uses the word "slave." These men who are used to at least some consideration because of their gender and their association with a famous miracle-worker and teacher must let go of their expectations to be served and become servants to those in need. We probably can't imagine what that might have been like. I think we get hints of that in the letters of the Apostle Paul, where he struggled with loss of status because he had responded to the call of Christ.

When Jesus called a child into the circle of disciples, he was doing something very strange, and again, we don't have a good grasp of what that might mean. Although children were loved by their parents, they had no rights in an adult world. Their place was with the women of the family until they were old enough to learn to work. Men did not pay attention to children, at least in public. Jesus called his disciples away from strict gender roles to illustrate his welcome to all people. He welcomed children as a woman would, and said, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me... and the one who sent me."

I'm glad we don't understand how radical his welcome was. I think it's because over the 2000 years since Jesus, his followers have taken to heart this teaching about the

importance of children. There are times when I wonder if we have gone too far in the direction of catering to children's whims and have neglected to give firm direction. I know I did some of that when my sons were in their teens. But for the most part, our acceptance and welcome of children has resulted in better education, health care, and other protections.

Jesus helped his disciples refocus their energies away from their cultural concerns and toward the mission of the rule of God, so that they would be able to carry on in his name. Our culture is different, but it too keeps us from giving ourselves to the work of Christ. We value independence and freedom and self-sufficiency. We want our children to think for themselves and make their own choices at an ever younger age. We like our entertainment and our opportunities to be competitive. Some of that has to be refocused if we are to follow Jesus with all that we are. Sometimes we need a reminder of how important it is to focus on eternal values.

From time to time, life provides those refocusing jolts – good events, like marriage or a new baby or a new job or retirement. We plan for those things, and often think we are in control of them, although any of them can hold their surprises. I've just realized that a baby born in 2010 has a fairly good chance of seeing the next century. What will life be like by then? The prospect of becoming a grandmother has been an eye-opening experience for me this week.

Other events that refocus our lives are not so welcome, like illness or job loss or natural disaster. Some of us heard Gary and Judy at Priscilla Circle this week, as they described their visit to New Orleans. We have just observed another anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, which continue to impact our lives. Many in our community have lost jobs that likely will never return.

This week in the life of the church has been difficult as someone we have known and loved for so long is now very seriously ill. What is most important at a time like this? Certainly not entertainment or sports, not freedom or wealth. This is when the values of the rule of God become our priorities. The real meaning of life is not status or reputation, not power or wealth. Real meaning is found in living the kind of life Jesus led, where service to the least and the last is most important; where all people are honored because they are brothers and sisters of Jesus; where we proclaim that good news by word and deed. Real meaning is found in a life in which relationships are nurtured and love never fails.

I can't say I know all of what Jesus meant when he called his disciples to become servants and to welcome children. I do believe that part of what he was saying and demonstrating was that we should love one another, as he has loved us. When life jolts us awake and refocuses us, whatever else we must learn and do will be surrounded by and saturated with the love of God which we know in Jesus Christ.

In the coming days, I am determined to remember and to remind myself daily of one of the key teachings of Scripture, "The steadfast love of the Lord endures forever. The steadfast love of the Lord endures forever." May we claim that promise for ourselves. May we share that love with one another and with the least and the last among us. And may God bless us with courage and strength as we follow Jesus Christ on the way.

Let us pray. Eternal God, in Christ you call us to show your love. May his peace shine in our words and his healing in our touch, and may we embody your welcome in all that we do. Amen.