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Prov.

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

Mark 9:30-37

The words “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all.....

And the image of Jesus holding the child in his arms are so familiar to those of us who have been to or taught Sunday School. I have a picture of my oldest son when he was about 4 cut out and placed in the arms of Jesus as a Sunday school project and I just cherish that picture. This is such a familiar Gospel reading that I almost said to myself, oh no, what can I possibly say that hasn't been said before and I gave the Spirit a little more time to move me this week. And I began to think about being second, or third or fourth in the Church's eyes. Because that's really what these readings are about this morning. The integrity of serving from second place. Or the losing position according to our “greatness” dominated society. It wasn't very long ago that the Church didn't allow children to come into the sanctuary, I can remember that and we hear in the Proverb reading today that there is strength and dignity and pride and beauty in the work and ministry of women. That was

a very bold statement back when these Scriptures were written. In the Jewish and Greco-Roman societies women and children were waaaayyy down on the totem pole. In fact they didn't even have a place on the rungs of society, they were mere possessions of a man, no more than slaves or property.

What struck me, was while the disciples were bickering about which one of them would get to sit at the head of the table one day, the position of power, Jesus reached down to the “nobody” child and announced “My kingdom is about a different kind of greatness than you know. It is about inclusiveness, it is about giving voice to the silenced, it is about giving a place of honor to every person. It is about the one who wants to be great achieving greatness by being the servant to the lowly among you. If you can understand this, you understand the purpose of my being here among you.

Jesus says: It’s not about YOU it’s about God’s empowering grace given to all. But the disciples are still living in the “Duh zone” as Bishop Mark MacDonald calls it. They don’t want to hear it when Jesus says, don’t tell anyone and don’t call me great. He refused to even be called good. In fact, they ignore him about telling no one, They don’t want to hear Jesus say I am going to be crucified like the outcasts of society.

I love the gospel of Mark because the disciples are US! There is no time between their answers to Christ and ours. Even though we can see back through our resurrection glasses we still have the same arguments and personal dilemmas as people of faith. And I know a lot of us say to ourselves, just like those closest to Jesus, “if I can’t be great at it then why do it”? When it comes to mission and ministry have you ever caught yourself saying, “others can do it better than me, so I ‘ll just let them?” I mean forget about the Church , look at the society we live in, where coming in second means you’re a Big loser. We love the T.V. shows like American Idol, Survivor ,The Biggest Loser! Cook offs, dance offs, stunts, singing contests, finding a husband, finding a wife--every thing is a competition! And every body wants to be Number one. Because that’s what we treasure today, that’s our only measure of success. Outdoing makes us feel superior to others.

When asked what instrument is the most difficult to play Leonard Bernstein answered “second Fiddle” Plenty of people want to play

first violin but to get someone to play second violin or second flute etc...that's a problem. Yet, without them there is no harmony.”

And that so reminds me of us in the Church. Does doing something better than another make us better than another? When there is so much emphasis put on being the greatest and first and most successful in our ministries and congregations we need to step back and ask (or let Jesus show us like he did the disciples) “how do we function/organize/operate/work together as the loving community that forms around Jesus the Christ.

And I know when it comes to volunteering and engaging in a ministry at church many of us say, “I won't be able to do it as well as so and so...or I'm not what they're looking for, I don't know enough or I'm not worthy enough”. And I believe these perfectly human, internal conflicts that we all have are the reason that the statistic about 80% of all the work done in the church is performed by 20% of the people is true. By Jesus' example, we need to understand there is dignity and grace playing second fiddle in ministry.

Jesus selected the disciples based upon their corporate giftedness, not that one had skills and abilities superior to the others. Only in combination with one another can we develop the kingdom of God and no servant is excluded and all are respected and loved by Our Lord.

Let me assure you, even though we live in this competitive society, The word “servant” does not mean “Doormat” or “Loser” neither are a baby in a manger or a man hanging on a cross images of powerlessness. The seemingly powerless women, men and children in our midst are a God given sign of Gods hospitality. We go forth from the liturgy to be servants who find greatness in humble service on behalf of those who are often forgotten or rejected in society. No greater among whom was Jesus Christ Our Savior the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last. Amen.