

**St John United Church of Christ**  
**Rev. Barbara Lohrbach**  
**September 24, 2006**

**Mark 9:30-37**

**Why don't you be last?**

The Special Olympics is the athletic competition designed around the special needs of those who are differently abled—both physically and mentally. One year at the Special Olympics in Seattle, nine contestants assembled at the starting line for the 100-yard dash. At the gun, they all started out, not exactly in a dash, but with a relish to run the race to the finish and win. One boy stumbled on the asphalt almost immediately, tumbled a couple of times, and began to cry. The other eight heard the boy crying. They slowed down and looked back. Then they all turned around and went back...every one of them. One girl bent down and kissed him and said, "This will make it better." Then all nine linked arms and walked together to the finish line. Everyone in the stadium stood and cheered for several minutes.

"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all"...a difficult lesson from Jesus, for the disciples and for us. We live in a world where on one hand, being first is acceptable and on the other hand, it can be seen as selfish or immodest. For instance—most of us want our children to do well in school and at times push our children to be first in their class, especially in high school where GPA and class rank affects scholarships and college admission. Being first is the goal in sports competitions and we are irritated when our team is on the losing end of the game. Vince Lombardi said, "Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing."

Yet at the same time we are skeptical of those who seek leadership in our world because we suspect all they want is power and wealth. We are suspicious of people who seek power because that power is often abused, protecting the interests of the powerful and rich at the expense of the less powerful. As the lies are uncovered and we learn tobacco does cause cancer, U.S. citizens were used as unwitting guinea pigs in nuclear radiation experiments, and government officials are corrupt, we become more suspicious of those who want to be great. Power corrupts.

But who wants to be last? Who wants to be powerless? We also want to be our best. We want to climb the ladder of success. We want to win friends and influence people. And so we are left with a dilemma. How can we reconcile our longing to be powerful in order that we might affect change in our world for the good even as we risk the possibility of abusing our power?

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Certainly one way to read the lesson from Mark is to say that Jesus does not want his disciples to be great. After all, Jesus has told the disciples for the second time in Mark's gospel that he is going to be betrayed and killed...not much power and greatness in that image. As they traveled on the way, Jesus heard the disciples arguing and when he asks them about it, they are silent. Jesus knows that the argument was about whom among them was the greatest. It might be argued that Jesus is telling them greatness is bad...be a servant, like me. But Jesus does not actually say that greatness is bad. He knows human nature and the need to be important. Jesus knows that the disciples are afraid of this talk about betrayal and death. He senses their embarrassment at having been heard arguing with one another about who was greatest. Jesus seizes the teachable moment and calls them together for a lesson.

He does **not** say, "Whoever wants to be first is a bad person, is greedy, power-hungry and corrupt." Jesus seems to affirm that the desire to be first is natural. He offers a new way to think of greatness. To be great, here's what you have to do. If you want to be first, you must be last of all and servant of all. What can this mean? It's okay to be first as long as you never act on the desire? If you want to be first in life, stay quiet, don't yell, don't raise your hand, walk to the end of the line. Sooner or later someone will see how good you are and reward you by sending you to the front of the line.

There are genuine problems with this interpretation as well. Many women have been taught that what Jesus meant was that they will be rewarded in this life or the next for always serving others first, for disregarding their own needs, even in the face of psychological and physical abuse. That is not what is meant by being last and servant of all. Domestic violence is never acceptable. And we are not called to be doormats.

Perhaps we need to look closely to whom Jesus was speaking in this lesson. What if we understood that Jesus was giving advice to those he had called for leadership...these 12 and all those to come who would embody Jesus' earthly ministry? To be great in God's world means to be a leader who is a servant, making sure that others are heard and have their needs met, and before we worry about our own.

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Part of the message of this passage is also a reminder not to overcomplicate our faith. The disciples want to argue and establish a ladder of greatness which, also serves to cloud the issues of Jesus' future suffering. Jesus "unclouds" the issue with a call to service.

The final part of this lesson from Mark is the proverbial last word that illustrates Jesus' meaning of the first must be last of all. Jesus brings a child among them and takes the child in his arms. Why a child? While we tend to place children first and risk everything to save the child, ancient Middle Eastern cultures placed the child last. If there was a raging fire, the husband was to save his father first, then his mother, next his wife, and last of all, his young child. The disciples are taught in this moment that they, the chosen 12, are no more important than the little child in the realm of God. A truly great leader, the most powerful one in the community, will receive a child, not as a dependent, not as an obligation, but as an equal, as a co-leader...because when you welcome the least powerful in the community, you are welcoming Jesus and in welcoming Jesus, you welcome God.

The disciples were confronted with the side of the cross that seemed like nothing but suffering and death—no wonder they were in denial. No wonder they started to create a dream where they could leave the cross behind. So Jesus teaches them to love the least. Today it is our turn to be confronted with this upside down vision of God's imagination. We cannot ignore anyone—they just might turn out to be the greatest.

Who would Jesus place among us today? The children were the people on the fringe of society. Who are the people on the fringes of society in our day? Would we welcome the guy or gal covered with multi-colored tattoos into our congregations? Would we welcome the deadbeat who works the system but won't get a job? Would we welcome into our churches the person of color who dates our daughter or son? Would we welcome the homeless guy into our churches who collects cans each day just to buy a quart of beer? Would we welcome the one whose outward appearance makes us question their Christianity? None of these people feel particularly loved by the church and maybe not even God. Just as the disciples were faced with their judgments, so are we. Here is Jesus saying go get them. Let them know they are loved and let them know they are God's people.

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Joanne Jones in the second month of nursing school was given a quiz by her professor. Joanne was a conscientious student and had breezed through the questions, until she read the last one: "What is the first name of the woman who cleans the school?" Surely this was a joke. She had seen the cleaning woman several times. She was tall, dark-haired and in her 50's, but how would Joanne know her name? Joanne handed in her paper, leaving the last question blank. Before class ended, one student asked if the last question would count toward the quiz grade. "Absolutely," said the professor. "In your careers you will meet many people. All are significant. They deserve your attention and care, even if all you do is smile and say hello." Joanne never forgot that lesson. She also learned the woman's name was Dorothy.