

“Elbowing Our Way to the Top”

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Mark 10:35-45

We live in a culture that teaches us always to look out for number one. In a competitive, achievement-oriented society, the honors go to the person who succeeds in elbowing his or her way to the top. Jesus, on the other hand, calls us to live another way. Listen for and hear Jesus’ words to the disciples.

Mark 10: 35-45

Today’s lesson is yet another of the many that document the fact that the disciples are having a difficult time understanding the totality of Jesus’ message. Usually it is Peter who puts his foot in his mouth—this time it’s James and John.

How many of you either when you were kids or once you had kids, remember someone running up to the parent figure and asking to sit in the front seat of the car? In our house it was always a power play to see who could win the coveted seat. Two of my brothers would always try to outrun each other to get to my Dad before the other to ask for the front seat. Sometimes it involved trickery; sometimes whining; other times there was the exacting mathematical tally of who had gotten it the most times--but there was always pushing and shoving involved.

Well, in our story, James and John weren’t physically pushing and shoving, but they were clearly trying to elbow their way into the prized seats next to Jesus. And their posturing did not go unnoticed by the other ten disciples. Clearly their trying to secure Jesus’ promise upset the others. Weren’t they all equal? Wouldn’t they all receive their reward? Just who did James and John think they were—anyway? Like my brothers who fought for the front seat, their elbowing didn’t make for a harmonious ride.

Jesus patiently explains to the brothers again that they don’t realize what they are asking. The road to glory with Jesus is going to involve pain and suffering and lots of work.

“What he is teaching them, over and over again, is that he will not be the Messiah they were expecting; he will not be the one who comes in and sets everything right, defeats evil and injustice on our terms, and ends in glory. No, Jesus will be betrayed, rejected, killed, and will rise again. Jesus’ identity as that suffering messiah will be crucial for their identity as his disciples. That is what he is teaching them. And none of them get it.

“To be fair, what Jesus is attempting to teach them is a very difficult lesson to learn. They have been expecting a triumphant, all-powerful Messiah. What they get is a suffering servant. They have signed on with Jesus for glory; Jesus talks to them of the way of the cross. It is hard for them to understand. Jesus keeps working with them, telling different stories, using various illustrations, but still they don’t get it.” (Pulpit Resource, p.18)

William Willimon tells a story about one of his sons: “When he was 11 or 12, our son had some difficulty in school. We took him to the psychologist who put him through a battery of tests to find out why he was having a tough time. Then we were called in to hear the results.

“Your son is a wonderful kid,” he said. “Unfortunately, he has an exaggerated sense of empathy for other people. He gets distracted from his school work by anyone else in the room who is having difficulty. He is kind, sympathetic, and really concerned about others.”

“Well what’s wrong with that?” we asked. “All those are esteemed Christian virtues.”

“Congratulations. You have done a good job of raising a Christian. Unfortunately, none of those traits lead to success in a public school.” (Pulpit Resource, p.14)

Is it any wonder that we get as confused as the disciples? Those characteristics that help us get ahead in the world are not the same ones Jesus asks us to emulate. We need to find a balance—a balance that allows us to live in the world, but not to be of it.

In order for us to get ahead in life, or to survive in public school when we’re children, there are certain qualities we must maintain. We have to be able to focus on what we’re doing. We must learn the material being covered. We have to do the best we can in order to get into good colleges and advance in our careers.

In our Christian lives, we need to temper the way we live with compassion, justice, and empathy. We must learn to compete without becoming overly competitive. We have to strive for excellence and integrity in our dealings with others. We must try to win without compromising our principles or harming others. And those may be very different skills than the ones we use in the rest of our lives.

It’s difficult for us as adults to grasp the differences, and it can be even harder for our children, as the story of the Willimon boy told us. But that doesn’t mean we don’t have to try.

“We’re all like James and John—we want the world’s adulation, and to get it we’ll do just about anything. The world recognizes greatness—it gives medals, awards, world records, and money to what society defines as success. Worldly success means power, wealth, fame, and beauty. Worldly success means you have the wherewithal to let nothing stop you on your way to the top. People become a means to an end. The game is all about who you know and how they can help you get where you’re going. Martin Luther King, Jr. called this the “drum major instinct”—we want to be out in front, leading the parade and being recognized for our skills and talents.” (Minister’s manual, p.92)

But Jesus knew that the world is fickle and if you don’t keep getting better, richer, more popular—you’ve fallen off the top. You can’t depend on the admiration of the world, but you can depend on the constancy of God.

There's nothing wrong with wanting to be the best you can be. But how you do it and how you live your life can make all the difference in the kind of person you become. Christians can be both great human beings and be good at what they choose to do or become. The secret to that kind of success isn't where you sit, it's the way you live your life. It's about who you are and whose you are.

Thanks be to God. Amen.