



Successfully Last – Touchpoint for September 18th, 2024

Mark 9:33-37 (NRSVUE) “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”

TOUCH POINT Then they came to Capernaum, and when he was in the house, he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?”³⁴ But they were silent, for on the way, they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.³⁵ He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”³⁶ Then 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.”

Grace and Peace to you from the mystery in whom we live and move and have our being

Whoever wants to be first must be last...

Jesus asks the disciples what they were arguing about when they thought they were all alone.

He'd already taught them in order to be last, we must let go of everything that made us first in the first place.

If anyone desires to be first, they must let go of their own self-centered ambitions. Some disciples left their jobs for goodness's sake. Notice they weren't arguing about who the greatest fisherman was, or tax collector or business owner, or thief, or anarchist, or religious teacher. They had to let go of their own ambitions to join a community of world changers. Now, they're making being a disciple, a competition. Today, they may have created a reality show called, “So you want to be a disciple.” “The Amazing Grace Race” has a nice ring to it. How about “Wives of the greatest apostles?”

It's such a blow to the ego when Jesus says I should choose to be last. It causes me to flashback to the grade school playground at recess. The bell would ring, and we'd run to the water fountain. When someone would take cuts in front, the line behind them went nuts. But curiously, no one ever complained about a kid taking cuts behind them. We only flipped out when it meant we needed to wait one more turn. Pushing always ensued.

So, I understand how needing to be first can be self-centered. But, there is something righteous about saying someone shouldn't take cuts, because it's universally true. So being right can be the perfect cover for the perfect crime. The crime is my real motive. I want to be first.

I can understand Jesus's statement that if someone wants to be first, they must learn to be last. But then he adds that wanting to be the greatest is not the best ambition. How does that work in our competitive environment? That's a hard one for me.

In the kingdom of hell, it is perfectly acceptable to want to be the greatest athlete or greatest chef; you fill in the blank. It appears to me that when someone's ambition is to be the greatest, the success of others haunts them and can make them feel like failures. It's been researched that the happiest Olympians are the bronze medalists. The most miserable are the silver medalists. Gold medalists don't register on the happiness scale because they have stuff. They got their reward. The ones who choose to use their position in life as servants to others are so incredibly powerful and world-changing. Aaaaah, I think there's something of great importance

here. Perhaps our goal is not to seek failure and resist success and titles. Maybe its about laying down the power we have. It's about becoming a servant to those without title power and collaborators with achievers to lift up the unknown heroes.

We love our titles, but everyone loves to see those with great achievements choose to lay them down in humility. And guess what? They take on a greatness about them that draws respect and admiration, and their voice carries great wisdom.

When Jesus heard what the disciples were discussing, he thought it critical enough to gather all twelve together and have them all hear the same thing. The danger of inauthentic desires to be the greatest.

The discussions may have sounded like this today:

False Pragmatism:

Disciple one: "I don't want to be the greatest, I just want to be the best I can be."

Response: "Then why don't you join the army, dude."

Disciple two: "I want to collect more walking yardage and hit the record books for RHD's resurrections, healings, and demon exorcisms! MVP, MVP!"

Response: "Come on Man, you had to go running to Jesus when we couldn't call that one beast out. I could have done it!"

Disciple three: "I'm not doing any of that stuff, I'm manifesting greatness. I've been going in my prayer closet."

Response: "Yeah, right! Every time we have to clean up camp, you have to go to your prayer closet."

There can only be one greatest of all time, and no one wants to be second. Second has no place in the competitive world of being the greatest. There is only one in this kingdom of theirs.

Have you ever thought you got through to a group of learners, and suddenly, they revert to the ways of old? Jesus sees this and responds with brilliance.

Jesus didn't say, "Guys, I heard everything you were saying back there. Knock it off!" Instead, he asked them if they listened to what they were saying. He was holding up a mirror so they could see themselves, appealing to their inner observer rather than an inner critic. He obviously knew what they were saying, but they needed to hear what they were saying as an observer of their behavior.

While developing a family prevention Program for families and their teens at Touchstone Residential Treatment Center, I attended a training by a brilliant family therapist and trainer. She was preparing us for home visits with challenging family dynamics. The trainer addressed uncomfortable situations and obstacles presented. Like when a parent may create uncomfortable situations to block or discount concerns for their teens' consecutive school absences. Greeting at the door partially dressed, creating chaos, feigning illness, etc.

Since I was sitting next to her, she asked if I would volunteer to role-play the father of a troubled teen. She said, "Henry, as the counselor of the teen, I'll ask you about your child's absences. I want you to put your hand on my knee and say, "Don't you worry, I have this under control." So, the conversation went something like this. "Hi, Mr. Rojas; the school called me and was wondering if you are aware of your son's school absences. How is everything? As I was instructed, I put my hand on the therapist's knee and patronizingly said, "Don't you worry, I have this under control."

She responded with a firm voice, "What are you doing?" I wanted to say, "I'm sorry, didn't you tell me to do that?!" But I didn't. I was speechless for what seemed like an hour. Quite honestly, her response caught me off guard. I instantly felt like a mirror was being held before me, showing my hand on her knee and the shock on my face. I slowly took my hand away from her knee. I was quite hoping she would start teaching again. She didn't. She repeated, "What are you doing?" I awkwardly said, "I'm touching your knee?" She relieved me of my anxiety and then explained the power of helping others to see their behavior themselves.

The trainer did just this by asking if I saw my behavior, forcing me to examine it.

Jesus artfully does this by asking what they were arguing about. He doesn't ask who said what. Jesus asks, "What were you arguing about?" He asks, "What was your topic?"

The disciples knew what was right. When they were seen, silence fell over them. Jesus made things visible. The therapist made things visible. To be the greatest is not an authentic desire; it is an inauthentic desire. Authentic desires have a quality that resonates within our deepest selves, includes others, and makes visible our oneness with God.

In his book *Discerning the Heart*, Wilke Au explains how to discern between authentic and inauthentic desires.

1. Authentic desires serve essentially to enlighten our hearts.
2. The more authentic our desires, the more they move us to understand God's preeminent wonder. This is satisfying to our deep yearning for God. Therefore, heart-searching is key to discernment because God is often the source of the desires that emanate from deep within our hearts.
3. Authentic desires are always in some way public.
 - a. It is a paradox that our desires reflect what is uniquely personal yet are stemming deeply from communal values.
i.e., superficial desires are linked to consumerism and narcissism.

William Barclay says the disciples knew in their heart of hearts what was right.

What does he mean by "in their heart of hearts..." That's Spirit! Our spirit and God's Spirit know what is right. Leaning into the deepest desires of our heart, we can plumb God's will within our deepest desires. Scripture says God wants to give us the desires of our hearts. It means the heart of my heart's desire. That is an authentic desire.

An inauthentic desire says, "I want to be the greatest, but the authentic desire says, "I want to want to be ok with not being the greatest." For the alcoholic, he/she may feel they want a drink. However, when I ask them what they sincerely want, they usually discover they do not want to drink. That's the difference between an authentic and an inauthentic desire. Not drinking would be good for me; good public policy and wonderful sober thinking about God's loving Oneness with us.

Resisting inauthentic desires can seem uncomfortable and often present feelings of emotional poverty. This place of poverty, this being last, is a portal to the abundant space of living in authenticity and inhibited freedom. That is what greatness is. Jesus' way was seeing and making the invisible visible leading to inner freedom.

Next time you watch a “debate” between people or an interview where an unkind statement is made, ask yourself, what would happen if Jesus asked, “What are you doing?” or “Hey, what are you two talking about?”

Jesus is friends with our inner observer.

Amen

Opening Songs

Be Still

(The London Fox Taizé Choir)

Be still, know that I am God

Calm Me, Lord

(Margaret Rizza)

Calm me Lord as you calmed the storm. Still me Lord, keep me from harm.
Let all the tumult within me cease. Enfold me Lord, in your peace.

Bible Passage

(A passage takes us from one place to another)

Touchpoint

(Where God’s story touches our life story)

Healer of Our Every Ill

(Marty Haugen)

Healer of our every ill, light of each tomorrow.

Give us peace beyond our fear, and hope beyond our sorrow.
You who know our fears and sadness. Grace us with your peace and gladness.
Spirit of all comfort, fill our hearts. *Refrain*
In the pain and joy beholding, how your grace is still unfolding
Give us all your vision God of love. *Refrain*

The Meal

The Lord's Prayer

(Monastery Choir of St. John of San Francisco)

Benediction

Gaelic Blessing/Deep Peace

(John Rutter, The Cambridge Singers)

Deep peace of the running wave to you. Deep peace of the flowing air to you.
Deep peace of the quiet earth to you. Deep peace of the shining stars to you.
Deep peace of the gentle night to you. Moon and stars pour their healing light on you.
Deep peace of Christ, of Christ the light of the world to you.
Deep peace of Christ to you.