

Pentecost 20B
Peace, Seattle
September 20, 2015
Mark 9:30-37

PLAYING SECOND FIDDLE

Someone once asked Leonard Bernstein, legendary conductor of the New York Philharmonic: WHAT IS THE MOST DIFFICULT INSTRUMENT TO PLAY?

Without missing a beat he answered: SECOND FIDDLE.

I can get plenty of first violinists, he said, but to find one who plays second fiddle with as much enthusiasm—or second French horn or second flute—now that’s a problem. And yet if no one plays second, we have no harmony.

Our gospel readings this month cluster around the questions:
WHO IS JESUS and WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO FOLLOW HIM?

And this week Mark takes us back to Galilee, to the place where Jesus launched his ministry. And here, for the second time, Jesus tells his apprentices the honest truth about where the path they’re on is heading.

THE SON OF MAN IS TO BE BETRAYED INTO HUMAN HANDS, AND THEY WILL KILL HIM, AND THREE DAYS AFTER BEING KILLED, HE WILL RISE AGAIN...

And just like the first time, up at Caesarea Philippi, they have no clue what he’s talking about. In fact, Mark tells us, it’s even worse than “having no clue;” for along the way the disciples get into a debate over WHICH OF THEM IS THE GREATEST—i.e. who deserves to play 1st fiddle.

Not only do Jesus’ companions not understand where he’s trying to lead them; they’re headed full speed in the opposite direction!¹

But rather than reprimand them, Jesus chooses to make this a teachable moment, and gathering the 12 around him he says:

WHOEVER WANTS TO BE FIRST MUST BE LAST OF ALL AND SERVANT OF ALL.

To illustrate his point, he uses a little child.

If the 12 had trouble wrapping their heads around what Jesus was saying, the challenge for us is just as great.

The quest for power, wealth, prestige, and celebrity preoccupy our culture. These are the attributes that define us—our value, our station, our social capital—and are central to our obsession to be #1. Who wants to play 2nd fiddle?

There were high expectations in the political sphere as 11 Republican candidates’ took the stage for last week’s debate. In the night’s most anticipated exchange, Carly Fiorina appeared to trump Trump, proving she could hold her own on the big stage. But in spite of efforts by the rest of the field to but him on his heels, The Donald managed to keep much of the attention on himself.

¹ Ched Myers, [Binding the Strong Man](#)

As election season grinds on, the rhetoric from candidates of both parties will only intensify; and in the end, for most, it'll boil down to this: Which party—and which candidate—will best assure America's role as the world's first fiddle?

The Christian Church, since Constantine, with notable exceptions, has played the same game. Brother Martin called it a theology of glory.

When you tour St. Peter's in Rome and see the sheer size and scale and grandeur of that place; when you see how it celebrates wealth and learn how the Vatican, through the centuries, used manipulative power and spiritual extortion to underwrite it all, you come away sensing the great gulf between the church's methods, and the poor Galilean preacher who said:

Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.

The disciples don't want to play second fiddle, the church doesn't want play second fiddle, nobody wants to play second fiddle! Will it ever change?

Pope Francis' first visit to our country this week is a highly anticipated event.

His statements and actions have demonstrated his conviction that the church must rededicate itself to serving the marginalized peoples of the world.

His critique of capitalism and his recent pastoral letter on the Care of Creation—*Laudato Si*—are guaranteed to make the powers-that-be uncomfortable.

Francis seems thoroughly committed to move the Roman Church back toward its roots as a SERVING COMMUNITY. And Christians across the board—including this one—are finding themselves in his cheering section, because we sense the authenticity and integrity of his mission.

President Xi Jinping of China will also be in the US this week, coming as leader of the world's most populous country—the ascendant giant on the world's economic stage.

In recent decades, China's move from the back row of the orchestra to the first row has been nothing short of meteoric, and its aspiration to unseat the U.S. as first fiddle in the world's economy seems only a matter of time.

When President Xi meets with state and corporate leaders here in Washington and with President Obama at the other Washington, I doubt that being last of all and servant of all will be on the agenda.

When Jesus gathered his apprentices around him and told them the child on his lap deserved to be in the circle with the rest of them, he confounded their expectations of what God's chosen way in the world was about. It wasn't until after his death and rising that they began to understand. And once that happened, it set them on a path to building welcoming communities that transformed lives.

When astronaut James Irwin was a boy, he often pointed to the moon and told anyone who would listen that someday he would travel there. Decades later his dream was realized when he became a member of the Apollo 15 crew that made a successful walk on the moon. Because of the mission's success, he had be a member of the most exclusive celebrity club in history: those who had set foot on the moon.

But on the voyage home something happened to him he didn't expect. He found himself humbled by the awesome goodness of God.

"As I was returning to earth," Irwin said, "I realized that I was a servant, not a celebrity. So I am here as God's servant on earth to share what I have experienced so that others might know the glory of God."

Our aspirations may not take us as far as James Irwin, but our role as servants of the Servant are no less important.

- We may answer the call to serve by pulling up invasive ivy at Lincoln Park,
- or by tutoring students in an after school program;
- We may answer the call to serve by helping an elderly neighbor do her shopping,
- or by taking time to befriend a person holding a cardboard sign,
- or by any one of a thousand other simple acts that embody caring and loving service for others.

Or our call to be servants may take us in an unexpected direction that reshapes the trajectory of our lives.

Pastor Richard Jensen tells a story of a young woman named Katie who was part of a Lutheran exchange program visiting churches in India and Nepal. As the group toured a hospital in Nepal one day, an emergency announcement was broadcast through the corridors:

DOES ANYONE PRESENT HAVE TYPE O NEGATIVE BLOOD.

WE HAVE A DYING BABY ON OUR HANDS.

Katie volunteered. She did, indeed, have TYPE O negative blood. So while the rest of the group continued their tour of the hospital, she gave blood to save the life of a child she didn't even know.

The transfusion was a success. The child lived. And Katie was overwhelmed by the experience.

"It was one of the most powerful experiences of my life," she said later.

"People came up to me and said, 'How nice of you to give your blood for that child.'

But it wasn't like that at all....It was as if it were not even my blood to give. It was God's blood.

It was Christ's blood," she said. "It belonged to that child just as much as it belonged to me.

I can't explain it. There was a mysterious connection between us. The whole experience was as a much a gift to me as to the child."

This morning during our Rally Day event downstairs, we all received passports and the invitation to follow in the footsteps of Jesus; to see what that following might teach us; where it might lead us.

When we put our trust in him there is no end to the possibilities.

Through his word and at his Table Jesus is here once more, calling us to be open to how and where he'll use us as servants in a world where too many vie to play first fiddle.

He calls us personally and individually—and as a people—to be a transformed and transforming community that embodies compassion. And he gives us his promise that he will remain with us all along the way.

Thanks be to God! Amen.