

Sunday, September 23, 2018 – Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
“The Last Shall Be First”

Mark 9: 30-37

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Story Framed

Adapted from CPR

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

We Las Vegans are facing a collective challenge to our sense of courtesy – courtesy of Project Neon. For some of you, twice daily you're rerouting, jockeying, racing between stoplights, adding extra time to your commute and sitting in a lot more traffic. Put to the test, thousands of people behind the wheel exhibit either grace or lack of grace, deference or deprivation, selflessness or selfishness.

Streets and highways, yes, but most avenues of modern life are just as crowded. Who is first and who is last challenges our patience and genuine love for others. How do we meet these challenges? Jesus brought his disciples together for a pointed lesson about such issues. We may benefit if we join their group when the Master Teacher helps us to comprehend the nature of true greatness.

For all the press about YouTube celebrities aside, few of us aspire to be celebrities. That status is out of reach for most. Fame is not for us. We like our privacy. We just want to be left alone. We are quite comfortable not striving for greatness. Yet even nonfamous people like us do not escape Jesus' words, "If anyone would be first." This is more like us. Whether deserved or undeserved, we like to receive preferential treatment. Getting ahead of others, taking precedence over others, pulling rank on others may be some kind of subliminal quest for greatness.

Jesus' disciples were coming off a letdown. In a village a few miles back, they had not been able to cast out, a demon possessing a young boy. They were frustrated because Jesus commissioned them to heal the sick and to cast out demons. But for a much-afflicted boy, they were helpless. They could not get it done. They were not so great. Jesus salvaged the situation.

By His great power, He drove away the demon. Jesus rescued the boy and restored him to his parents – you heard it last Sunday.

Then, Jesus went on with his disciples through the territory of Galilee. They were on foot. Small talk was common. These disciples could not easily move beyond their frustration and embarrassment in that recent village. Egos bruised and hurting, they could not cope with that letdown. It was more soothing to think about something else, about the powers they had been given and had used in a few instances. It was great, and they began to discuss who among them was the greatest.

Their conversation was taking a wrong turn. Some distance into their journey, Jesus reminded them He was on another journey of servanthood supreme. It was for real. Not many days ahead, the Son of Man would be delivered into the hands of men. He would not resist, and they would kill him. And when he was killed, after three days he would rise again. The disciples did not understand, and they were hesitant, fearful to inquire further with Jesus about the meaning of his “death talk and walk,” the cross, suffering, and dying.

Such a prediction of servanthood and trauma for Jesus should have toned down the disciples' bickering about their own greatness. And we should be a little sheepish ourselves. Baptized into Christ, we are linked by that Baptism to this very trauma, His serving us by suffering and death, as well as His rising again. But servanthood may be farthest from our minds. We press ahead, our egos yearn to be first over others. Arriving at Capernaum, settling probably at Peter's home, Jesus inquired, “What were you discussing on the way?” They were put on the spot, and there's that greatness talk again. We understand their discussion. If we seek neither greatness nor fame, still we strive to be first over others.

As long ago as this was, we're not really any different today. We know how the ancient mind worked. We know because nothing is more aggravating than putting in your name at a restaurant and seeing 20 parties ahead of us, or having your meeting time and location change on the facility calendar because some new group is using the space. “Wait, didn't they guy get

here after us? Why are they getting seated already?! Why are we getting bumped?!" We are agitated when others get ahead on their personality or their good looks or their gender while we work and hone skills and gain experience only to be passed over. "Nice guys finish last," we grumble and complain, because we want to finish first, we desire to be waited on, we want the promotion, the better pay, we want to advance.

Perhaps that explains so much palpable anger among many Christians in the United States today. We lash out at a loss of privileged place in society, we bemoan the church no longer being in charge and at the center of social life, we lament the world being the world and we seek safety and security laws and politics and caustic, seemingly righteous indignation.

Perhaps consciousness of our fixation with being first is a teachable moment. Jesus found a chair in a room of Peter's house, sat down, and called the Twelve, all of them, to hear what he had to say. Precedence over others, striving always to be first, is a matter he would address and answer with some authority and finality. He had asked them what they were discussing, and whenever Jesus asked a question of the disciples, his intention was to provide new teaching.

Here it is: "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." Stunned? Such an axiom—taking last place, serving others—is contrary to everything our selfish world is about, a total reversal of dominant ideas of rank and greatness. How do we get ahead, how can we progress, how can we win this way, serving all, settling for last in order to help others be first? How are we going to get to work on time pushing through crowded roads and streets, giving place to others? We'll be late *and* last.

Jesus was shaking his head in frustration. He had spoken about his own servanthood even unto death on the cross, and His disciples went on arguing who would be greatest among them. And we do not get it. We don't catch on. And we have grown comfortable with getting ahead and being first always. The Lord's disciples were not easily going to let go of their ego aspirations to greatness. They enjoyed the discussion, the dispute, the argument. It was going

nowhere. And they would never learn the discipline of proper love for their neighbor, arguing themselves into positions of greatness.

The disciples need a lesson, a clear lesson, perhaps an object lesson. And Jesus obliges. See here, a toddler running through the room. Jesus grabs the little guy, sets him in the middle of the disciples, puts his arm around the child, and says to His misguided disciples, “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.”

How disarming of the fattened ego, the aggressive ego, is such a child. Whoever receives, listens, and fulfills the need and serves a little child, says Jesus, serves me, and the heavenly Father who sent me. The child is Jesus’ object for learning the lesson of true greatness, becoming last and the servant of all. The child is unassuming. He has needs, wants. You cannot ignore his cries. And the little child, once you do for him what needs to be done, once you serve him, will he ever repay or return the favor? No! So soon the little one forgets and merely goes his way. And there you are—having worked, provided, given, you get no thanks because you dared to place yourself last and the child first. But the person who does just this for a child honors our Lord and our heavenly Father who sent him (v 37).

We learn that the only proper way to be first is to step back and be last, and from that lowly posture, serve others in everything we do. Becoming first by serving from a position of last is the very fabric of the new world Jesus brought to pass when he descended so very low, even to death on the cross, shedding the brilliance of the light of the glory of heaven, setting aside all of his power, to assume the form of a servant, the Suffering Servant, reshaping the entire fabric of life on earth, transforming it from selfish ambition to selfless serving and giving.

I’m sure you’ve had the experience due to Project Neon that some drivers take unfair advantage of the inconvenience and push other drivers around. Some are taken by road rage. But many slow down, pause to let the other driver have place, and are last in order to help others be first and get on their way. Not just roadways, but every avenue of life in our

communities, at the workplace, at our churches, in our homes, is opportunity to gather before Jesus and hear his words, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all" (v 35). It is the way to live, the way to win, the way to be first. In Jesus' name, amen.