

## **Not everybody can be first, but everybody can be last**

Mark 9:33-37

September 20, 2015

*When they reached the house, Jesus asked them, "So, what were you guys arguing about along the way?"*

*Dead silence. Nobody said anything, because they had been arguing about who was the greatest!*

*Jesus looked around at them and then said, "Come here. Sit down. If any of you want to be first, put yourself last and be the servant of everybody else."*

*"Look. Whoever welcomes one of these children for my sake, welcomes me. And if you welcome me, you welcome the One who sent me."*

Oh, how I want to be first! I'll admit it. You don't have to, but I will. Anything I do, I want to win. I want to be the best.

So, how do you think this is working out for me? Sometimes, in some situations, I am the best, but a lot of the time -- most of the time!-- I'm not. And then? I've failed? I am no good?

This afternoon, most of the National Football League teams will play their second game of the season. Between now and the beginning of January, thirty-two teams will play sixteen regular season games and then the best of them will contend in a month of playoff games before a new Super Bowl champion is crowned on Sunday, February 7, at Levi's Stadium in Santa Clara, California. One winner and thirty-one-one losers.

Who is the current champion? Oh, that's right. It's the New England Patriots! Remember that game? The Patriots and the Seahawks? It all hinged on one play. What a fine line there is between winning and losing! Both teams played well. Both teams "deserved" to win. A few inches or a few tenths of a second difference and the Seahawks might have won.

But that's not the story. The story is the Patriots, Butler and Brady and Belichick, are heroes because they won and the Seahawks, Wilson and Bevell and Carroll, are goats because they lost. Because not everybody can win. That's how you play the game.

But do we have to play the game?

It's not just me and not just the disciples. We are all programmed almost from birth, by our families, by our schools, by the rest of humanity, to think in teams of winning and losing. Living itself is a competitive sport! We are always having to compare ourselves, to measure ourselves, against each other. Am I on top? Or on the bottom? And how -- oh yes, how! -- can I move up?

*The Voice, America's Got Talent, the Emmys, the Oscars -- who is the greatest? Microsoft, Apple, Google, Amazon -- who is the greatest? The United States, Russia, China, the European Union -- who is the greatest? Trump, Fiorina, Bush, Clinton, Sanders, Carson, Rubio -- who is the greatest?*

It's all a game. Isn't it?

The presidential campaign isn't about ideas. It's about personalities. It's about winners and losers. I wonder sometimes if the parliamentary system of governing doesn't have some advantages, voting for a party, for a platform, instead of a single leader.

But it's still a game. It's all a game. Even if we don't want to play the game, we still measure ourselves by its rules. Who is the greatest? And if I am not, then what am I? It makes for a lot of losers, or, at least, people who, in their heart of hearts, feel like losers.

Jesus took a child and had him stand in front of them. Why a child? Because it's no contest! Because there is no sense in trying to argue that a child is the greatest! A child can't compete with an adult. Children are not yet as strong, as smart, as confident as they one day will be. They are at a disadvantage: smaller, weaker, dependent, less knowledgeable, more vulnerable.

To spend time with a child, to welcome a child, is to change the conversation. It's not about who is the greatest anymore. To really be with a child, you have to "lower" yourself. You have to get down. You have to pay attention. You have to listen. You have to set aside your own agenda. You have to serve.

*Whoever wants to be first must place himself last.*

Tell me. If everybody is last, who wins?

Planting seeds of hope. That's our theme. You can plant a seed of hope by refusing to play the game, or by playing the game, but with different rules: not trying to get ahead, but trying to get behind; not striving to be first, but choosing to be last.

How might we plant seeds of hope as a church? By not asking who is the biggest, the best, the rightest, the greatest. By not seeing ourselves as competitors, but as servants: to other churches, to other denominations, to other religions, even to people who think any kind of religion is bunk. And by investing time and money and attention and ourselves into children. Because when we welcome one child, we welcome Jesus.

How might we plant seeds of hope as members of a nation? By not having to ask who is the biggest, the best, the rightest, the greatest! As long as we play that game, as long as we are all playing that game, human history will continue as it has, a litany of war after war after war. Peace will come, God's kingdom will come, only when we start playing by different rules.

How might you plant a seed of hope in your own soul? You don't have to. Jesus already has. Jesus has wrapped his arms around you and said to you: "Welcome, my beloved child!"