

First Things First

Mark 9:30-37

Sermon Notes from the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
18th Sunday after Pentecost, September 23, 2018
Rev. Matt Matthews

Help me finish this sentence: *Where there's a will, _____*. You might expect that sentence to end like this: *Where there's a will, there's a way*. There are other endings, however, some of them amusing if not funny. *Where there's a will, I want to be in it*.

That is a paraprosdokian—a figure of speech in which the latter part of a sentence or phrase is surprising or unexpected in a way that causes the reader or listener to re-frame or re-interpret the first part. Paraprosdokians are often funny.

- Going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than standing in a garage makes you a car.
- Knowledge is knowing a tomato is a fruit; Wisdom is not putting it in a fruit salad.
- I didn't say it was your fault; I only said I was blaming you.
- You do not need a parachute to skydive. You only need a parachute to skydive twice.
- I used to be indecisive. Now I'm not sure.
- Nostalgia isn't what it used to be.

There may be something like a paraprosdokian at work in our passage today from Mark's gospel. If you were to ask Jesus' original listeners to fill in this sentence, it would have been interesting to hear their responses: ***Whoever wants to be first must be _____*** (last and servant of all). His listeners would not have expected Jesus' answer. We church people are used to Jesus' twists, but his original friends probably were not; the way Jesus had of turning things upside down was new to them. ***Whoever wants to be first must be last and servant of all?***

Jesus, that doesn't make sense.

- In politics: Whoever wants to be first must be elected.
- In sports: Whoever wants to be first must get the most points.
- In business: Whoever wants to be first must make the most sales.
- In education: Whoever wants to be first must have the highest GPA.
- In music: Whoever wants to be first must have the prettiest saxophone solo.
- In preaching: Whoever wants to be first must preach the shortest sermon.

In church—because we've heard this passage before—we might be able to fill in that sentence biblically: ***Whoever wants to be first must be last and servant of all***. But only in church does that sentence make sense. Otherwise, the ending is counterintuitive. The way Jesus finishes that sentence is unexpected. In the real world, it's dog eat dog, and being first means winning.

But this is not Jesus' definition of success. If you want to be great, you will know what it's like to be

the least. If you want to be great, you will know what it's like to be at the end of the line with the lowliest of the low. If you want to be great, you will know what it's like to give your ticket to somebody else. If you want to be great, you will be attentive to and aware of those who suffer.

That definition of greatness is odd to the modern ear. And it was odd to the ancient ear, too.

Jesus' way simply is not the most obvious or logical way. His path, certainly, isn't the easiest. When Jesus first predicts that he will suffer, Peter jumps in to suggest another way (Mark 8:31). But Jesus tells Peter, "You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Jesus will suffer as a way of identifying with all people who suffer. Jesus will die on a cross to win the last place ribbon. Jesus will experience the exhaustion of shame and rejection in order that all who labor and are heavily burdened will find a dear, honest friend in his company.

* * *

At the Big Event, we had several neighbors who aren't part of our church approach the food trucks for lunch. They were gently turned away.

Another member of our church overhead the exchange and intervened. To eat here you need a ticket. But we'll get you a ticket. We'll get you some food. And we'll get you a place in the shade to eat it. *Welcome, neighbor.*

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

By the end of the morning, some of our littlest children had run themselves ragged. They were tired and hungry. So they waited in the long, hot line at the pizza truck. Some of them were teary, over-tired, and really hungry. Not to worry. Adults left their meals and stood with the littlest of the little. They helped the children order their food. These adults comforted these teary children while they waited, and no child waited alone. A small miracle. And everybody got plenty to eat. Another miracle. And, of course, there were leftovers for another meal.

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

At the Big Event *Hearts, Hands, & Voices: One Community Together*, we packed gift bags for those nearby neighbors who, for whatever reason, have found themselves at the bottom of the hill. We cut and tied scarves and hats for people who otherwise would not have them this winter; when the snows come, I suspect will see some of those scarves and hats again on the heads of smiling, warm neighbors. Gift books were stamped and will be given to children whose mom or dad is in prison. A homeless neighbor will have lotion for her cracked hands. A child will have a small toy.

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

I can't think of a better way to be first.

You want to be first? Put first things first. Meet those who are last or least. Find those who suffer or who are ill-equipped to ever become king of the mountain. Introduce yourself. Share a slice of your pizza. Be a neighbor.

This is how the Prophet Isaiah puts it:

If you remove the yoke from among you,

the finger-pointing, the wicked speech;

if you open your heart to the hungry,

and provide abundantly for those who are afflicted,

your light will shine in the darkness . . .

You will be called Mender of Broken Walls,

Restorer of Livable Streets. —Isaiah 58:9-12 [CEB]

* * *

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

After what we may call Jesus' paraprosookian, Jesus took a child in his arms. "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

You want to be great?

Love like *that*.

GOSPEL MARK 9:30-37

³⁰They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; ³¹for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "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." ³²But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

³³Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" ³⁴But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. ³⁵He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." ³⁶Then 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."

³⁰ Ils partirent de là et traversèrent la Galilée. Jésus ne voulait pas qu'on le sache, ³¹ car il enseignait ses disciples et il leur disait: «Le Fils de l'homme sera livré entre les mains des hommes; ils le feront mourir et, trois jours après avoir été mis à mort, il ressuscitera.» ³² Cependant, les disciples ne comprenaient pas cette parole et ils avaient peur de l'interroger.

³³ Ils arrivèrent à Capernaüm. Lorsqu'il fut dans la maison, Jésus leur demanda: «De quoi discutiez-vous en chemin?» ³⁴ Mais ils gardèrent le silence, car en chemin ils avaient discuté entre eux pour savoir qui était le plus grand. ³⁵ Alors il s'assit, appela les douze et leur dit: «Si quelqu'un veut être le premier, il sera le dernier de tous et le serviteur de tous.» ³⁶ Il prit un petit enfant, le plaça au milieu d'eux et, après l'avoir pris dans ses bras, il leur dit: ³⁷ «Celui qui accueille en mon nom un de ces petits enfants, c'est moi-même qu'il accueille, et celui qui m'accueille, ce n'est pas moi qu'il accueille, mais celui qui m'a envoyé.»