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Mark 9:30-37
INSIST ON BEING FIRST

The disciples were silent. If Jesus were visibly here sitting next to you, wouldn't you ply Him with a thousand questions? But in this instance the disciples held their tongues.

It was Jesus' final year with His disciples. Much of that year He devoted to more deliberate training of them. Mark 9 tells us, *They passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were because he was teaching his disciples. He said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him and after three days he will rise. But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.* Were they all afraid to ask because none of them wanted to look like the only guy who didn't get it? Or were they afraid to ask because what Jesus was saying sounded a little scary?

It was likely a combination of those factors. But then Mark 9 tells us, *They came to Capernaum. When Jesus was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?" But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.* Oh, now they are silent again but for a very different reason! This is a silence of shame.

It might sound like a silly argument -who's the greatest, but perhaps it's understandable. For some 2 years they'd seen countless miracles pour out from Jesus - giving sight to the blind, meeting evil spirits head on, barking orders at the weather, and even raising the dead. Jesus always seemed to know exactly the right thing to do, exactly the right things to say. No one ever seemed to get the best of Him, not even the ever-plotting Pharisees. To be with Jesus was surely to be on the winning team. His talk of betrayal, arrest, sufferings and death didn't seem to jibe with what they'd experienced.

Perhaps there was also confusion over the way Jesus had dealt with them individually. Nathanael had been marked by Jesus as a true Israelite in whom there is no guile. Did that mean something special in the Kingdom? Peter, James and John were the only three

whom Jesus brought into the bedroom of Jairus' daughter when He called her back to life. The same three were privy to what happened on the Mount of Transfiguration. Surely they had clout. And what about the fact that Peter was singled out by Jesus for his confession that Jesus is the Christ? Wouldn't that count for something? Besides, these were much happier prospects to contemplate than the disastrous outcome that Jesus seemed to be dwelling on.

Jesus was well aware what their silence meant, both times. So what does Jesus do? Does He scold them? Does He humiliate them and take them down a few notches? No. The surprising thing is that Jesus encourages them! You want to be first in the Kingdom? Go for it! Strive for it! Insist on being first! It's not like in this world where only one person can take first place. In the Christ's Kingdom, everyone can be first. Jesus said, *If anyone wants to be first*. In fact, be advised, refusing to strive for first place in the Kingdom of God puts you out of God's Kingdom and into the realm of satan.

Christ's Kingdom flips things upside down. In this world, being first means asserting yourself, playing second fiddle to no one, beating the opposition. Let's

listen to Jesus define what being first means in His Kingdom. Mark 9 says, *Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all." He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, Jesus said to them, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me."*

God the Son, the Almighty, the second person of the Trinity, holds this child before them and then takes this child into His arms. It's a beautiful thing. It's breathtaking. This is not squishy, sentimentalism. The Almighty God concerns Himself with the smallest and least regarded among us. The way to be first in God's Kingdom is not to push others aside, but somehow to place yourself underneath the littlest, the least significant people.

Children in the Roman world in Jesus' day were regarded as dispensable. Archeologists have discovered sewers clogged with the tiny bones of newborn babies dumped down the drain. In the Jewish culture things weren't much better. Divorce was rampant. Having few alternatives, divorced mothers tended to resort to

prostitution while their children would run as orphans, considered as little more than vermin. Are we a culture that values children? In America approximately 1 million abortions are performed per year -not counting pregnancies terminated at the advice of doctors who think something is wrong with the fetus. Are there any voices in our culture, would the Today Show feature a parent putting their life, their career, on hold to raise children? Would it be said that such a person is a role model for young people today? Or, if in particular that person were a Christian, would it be said that they are being repressed?

Conversely, why is it so difficult for nursing homes to find help in caring for the aged? Why isn't the wage for this exponentially higher?

We can take Jesus' words here literally and we can also infer their truth as a general principle. Children usually cannot fathom or appreciate what we actually do for them -the cost, the sacrifice, the inconvenience, the burden of responsibility. They are in no position to pay us back. Indeed, our reward is that they often try our patience. But service to such as these is the kind of service God the Father loves most. Not our big, bold personal accomplishments.

This doesn't come naturally to us, though, does it? We might be all for the government doing this or that for the needy and helpless and it's easy to feel righteous about that as long as it doesn't interrupt our personal lives in any way. Isn't it our desire to be first, rather than a servant, that causes most of our marital problems? Maybe we do work very hard on our job or some volunteer thing, but, boy, we'd better get some recognition for it, right?

None of us likes to be inconvenienced. None of us likes to be forgotten. In our hearts we are each the furthest thing from what Jesus wants. At times we are not even interested in being first in His Kingdom. What we deserve is to be last, not even to be in His Kingdom at all.

But the King of kings is also the Servant of all servants. He proposes only what He Himself has done. Even as His disciples were discussing who was the greatest, He was teaching them how He, *the* Greatest, would fill that role. He would go lower than the lowest among us, lower than our lowest moments and our most unspeakable sins, subjecting Himself to the harshest damnation, the deepest anger of the Almighty, the most

horrifying abandonment of His Father, as He hung on the cross. That wasn't all of it. Even while He walked this earth, every moment, every Word, every action He took was thoughtfully aimed at saving us and earning our way to heaven. Like children we can never fully fathom what Jesus went through for our sakes, nor can we ever adequately appreciate it. But Jesus loves the undeserving and serves the undesirable. And by His sacrifice we receive the greatest forgiveness and the highest salvation. He gives it to us, without even having been asked, even while we were busy looking for greatness somewhere else.

The First among Servants redeemed us to become like Him. He insists on each of us becoming first in His Kingdom. He provides the reason, the motivation, even the power. We are able to say, "My spouse, my children, that Alzheimer's patient, my little brother, my church, my manager will never know all that I did and endured for them. But that's OK. Jesus knows. And He has given me all the reward, recognition and appreciation I could ever want or need by His death on the cross and His resurrection, in my Baptism and in the Lord's Supper. I am full and have more than I could have asked for. So I can give myself away and serve the

least, the littlest, the lowest even as Jesus has served me.”

The Bible doesn't say it, but perhaps the disciples were silent for another moment after this. This time, not a silence of fear or of shame, but a moment of reflection and gratitude. Sometimes silence is good.