

Providence Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. David Pettit
September 26th, 2021
Mark 9: 30-37

It was nine years ago this fall that we moved into a student apartment at Princeton Theological Seminary. I had applied to some Ph.D. programs the prior year and came close to getting in a couple places. But as a pastor in the boonies, I was not precisely what admission committees were looking for. I got an acceptance but no funding in one place, first on the waitlist at another. So, I did what many aspiring Ph.D. students had to do in those days of competitive programs, which is probably still the case—go get another degree and fresh recommendations from top scholars in the field and apply again. So, I enrolled in the one-year Th.M. program at Princeton.

At the time of starting classes, I was somewhat versed in the realities. There were very few positions in Ph.D. programs anymore. The 2008 crisis had shrunk endowments and programs, and most programs might bring on one student in a particular field. And if one did get into a program, it was an even stiffer climb to get one of the few academic teaching jobs out there. This made everything exceptionally competitive, especially when the average applicant was 25 and fresh out of prestigious schools. I was a not-so-young 38, a small church pastor, and a bit of a theological and educational mutt.

My classes at Princeton met in a big old slate roof house that housed the bulk of the Old Testament department. It was a rather tight room. We all sat around a few large tables pushed together. There was a cohort of about eight of us that took most of our classes together. Princeton brought in 1-2 students in Old Testament. And in most of our classes were the two Ph.D. students who were currently in classwork, John and Kristin. The rest of us were Th.M. students or M.Div students finishing up and planning to go on to further study. So, it started. We began sizing each other up. Who was the greatest? Who had the best CV? Who was the smartest and the best writer and the most likely to be chosen?

Now we were good folks, not inclined to such vain measurements, but there was a practicality to the question. We were anxious, for one, to know if we would make it. And we knew that to make it, we had to figure out how to rise to the top. It was the environment, the culture, the reality of such scholarly pursuits. There was a metric for sorting out where you fit in it all, and we all wanted to get in and have the best chance at a scholarly career.

Our gospel passage makes me remember that fall semester at Princeton. The disciples are not particularly vain and image-driven folks, I don't imagine. But they lived in a hierarchical culture with its own values and norms that they were enculturated in. And so, there were practical aspects to the question of who is the greatest. One particular environment where the question of importance mattered is where one sat at a hosted meal.

Even as Jesus asked them what they were talking about on the road, they were in a house. Houses were not big, and I assume that if they are in the house, they are probably about to sit down in the guest room to have a meal around a table. And at any such meal, you didn't just sit anywhere. The host and his special guests sat at the head of a three-sided table, at the left end as you face the table. Then down along the long and other short side, the others sat in descending order of importance, status, and rank. It was an explicitly hierarchical culture. I say explicitly, because I think there is often a metric of hierarchy at play in culture, communities, and institutions. It is not, however, always explicit or acknowledged.

Nonetheless, they were in a hierarchical culture, and different factors played into such rankings. Age certainly played a role, as did titles, and honors granted along the way. So, the disciples were essentially reading and comparing their CVs as they walked along the road, deciding who got to sit closer to the head of the table. They were sizing each other up. They were conditioned to do so.

And so it was that fall at Princeton Seminary, our little cohort began trying to impress professors in order to get those coveted letters of recommendation needed by the end of the semester, and competing for the eye of our professors so that we might sift to the top of the stack of applications come about Jan 15th.

I discerned very quickly that Collin was brilliant, a natural linguist, already had a paper approved for publishing, read like lightening, retained it, and was likely to have his pick of programs, and indeed he did, a fully funded fellowship at Emory University. So, I conceded Collin would be ahead of me in any competition. As to Travis, I thought I could beat him, though it turns out he was pretty smart too. Brian didn't seem as dead set on the Ph.D., and so we hoped the discouragement of it all would take care of him. Austin was hard to read. She had her sights set on the Ph.D. but rumor had it that she crashed and burned in a presentation the prior semester, which was both a warning to us newbies that one misstep and curtains, and good news that she was less of a threat. Jacob was a different matter. He seemed like a mad scientist, and I couldn't tell if that meant he was a genius and I was done for, or he was too far over on the crazy scale and that he would not be chosen. He had a little bit of a meltdown mid-semester from the stress.

In the end, none of us aspiring students went to Princeton for the Ph.D. Travis didn't get into the programs he applied to, though he got close. I got in out here in Denver. Austin continued on in pastoral ministry, forgoing the pursuit of the Ph.D. Collin went to Emory full funded, has a CV longer than my arm, and yet is still unable to land a full-time job in the competitive realities of higher education. Luckily, our little cohort had the wherewithal to recognize that the decisions of professors were out of our hands, as were their logic. So, we chose comradery; working and learning together, and gathering together to celebrate and mourn each other's progress or lack there-of. John, one of those Ph.D. students at the time is still trying to finish his degree. And Kristin, the other, is the only one who got a full-time teaching gig.

Mid-way my first year in the DU-Iliff program I started as the part-time pastor at Calvary Presbyterian. It was a return to ministry and a welcomed balance for me. For I realized that when I was a small-town pastor in the Catskills, I always listened and was present to others; my own voice and ambitions seemed to get pushed to the margins. But in the competitive world of academics, it was all about oneself, one's progress, one's CV, about doing whatever you can to sift to the top so that you can be one of the few to get one of the scarce jobs out there teaching at prestigious universities. You had to have a drive and a strategy for becoming the greatest, for getting to the top of the hierarchy. And in the world of scarce jobs, it doesn't stop. But how do you imitate the Christ who empties himself and who calls you to be the last and the servant of all in a culture of self-advancement, parading and presenting one's own qualifications and greatness at every possible opportunity?

Academia was my experience with an institution or subculture that imposed a set of values upon you to succeed. I wonder what experiences like that you have had. What experiences have you had that imposed a set of values or aspirations, or maybe a set of constraints on you? Was it your experiences within a corporation, or field of work, or institution, or family of origin, or broader cultural trends? Like the disciples, what patterns and values have you been enculturated in? And I wonder if we could get some perspective on these things if we would come to see how incongruent those values are with the values of discipleship, community, and ministry.

Processing my experience with academia reminds me that there is a general incoherence, or incompatibility between the ambitions of our culture, of the values of honor, and wealth, and being right, and respect and security and family and such things, and what Jesus calls us to be. For even while the disciples are concerned

with the cultural game of who is the greatest, and as they are in a house and will soon sit down at the table, presumably in the seats that they argued over on the road, Jesus says: “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” You want to be the greatest, be the one who serves the meal, who washes the feet, not the one near the head of the table. That is a hard teaching to apply if you’ve been conditioned to avoid such a lowly state, such an unflattering fate.

And then Mark tells us that Jesus “took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.” This statement brings with it a whole set of associations around the qualities of children, which the Rev. Bob Flory did a beautiful job depicting at our installation service about a month ago. But perhaps the main implication that Jesus is drawing attention to here is that children are at the bottom of the hierarchy. They are the youngest, they have no honors or awards, no status or titles. They are, in fact, not seated at the meal at all. They are so low on the scale that they are not in the room.

So rather than worrying about chumming with the greatest, or inviting the greatest to your own meals, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.” So rather than trying to be the greatest, be the servant. And rather than trying to welcome the greatest, become friends with the least. For, as Jesus says here, “whoever wants to be first must be last of all.”

You see, at the core of our faith is the reality that at some point, we discover an incompatibility. We encounter the incongruence between the culture and the institutions that have shaped us, and the path of following Christ. At the core of our faith is the reality that at some point we will have to break from the cultural training we have received and be transformed by the renewing of our minds, as Paul phrases it. We have to slowly wrap our brains and our choices around the values Jesus calls us to.

Now, this little episode of arguing about who is the greatest comes right after Jesus is speaking about his non-messiah sounding messiah path. Jesus is going to be the messiah, but a messiah who breaks from cultural expectations “For 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.’” Jesus will become the servant instead of the highest rank. Jesus will become that which everybody tries to avoid. Jesus will be the betrayed one. Instead of being promoted and honored, he will be killed. He will become the least. And he

will welcome the least, the children, the tax collectors, the lepers, the sinners, and the ones cast aside for one reason or another.

In our conversation on Monday evening at our Ruminations gathering, a theme that ran through the passages we read is how hard it is to change our programming, how much we are shaped by culture and our families of origin, and our experiences, and it takes a lot of work to live by a different truth, a different set of values. And often times, we bring ourselves to the church, and the church becomes the arena where our humanity plays out, and it takes a lot of time and concentrated work to let our humanity be transformed in the pattern of Christ.

This is what I saw in my experience in academia. Despite all the higher pursuits of critical thinking and growth in perspective, the values of a hierarchical tradition and cutthroat competitiveness created an environment full of paradox and discord. And even at Princeton, where the language of calling was often invoked, that notion of calling had merged with the values and a culture of elite academics. The church has played into similar quagmires down through time. In my era of church leadership, there has been a move to shape polity and the structure of the church in the pattern of the corporate world. While there are transferable ideas and principles, in the end, the corporate culture will not produce the values and character Christ is trying to instill. There is a certain incompatibility. The prediction of his death communicates that Christ will redeem the world in a way we cannot fathom with our upwardly mobile mindsets and our pursuit of status and importance and such things.

The one who wants to be the greatest in God's kingdom must become the least. The greatest might have to be willing to not win the argument or have everything go the way we wanted. The greatest might have to be willing to associate with and minister to the one Christ calls us to, not necessarily who we had in mind. The path of leadership will not be having authority, but serving well.

Now, I don't mean to say in all this that there are not things that we can learn from our experiences in different fields that benefit the church. Business experience, and leadership experience, and family experience can benefit us here as we lead the church. But I am saying that we should not assume that the values learned in these arenas are the same as God's kingdom, as Christ's church. And if we are open, we might start to wonder, start to probe, in what ways we have been conditioned, either in broader cultural patterns, or in specific patterns deriving from our individual experiences, that may need to be examined and maybe transformed.

Because at the core of the gospel is the Christ who calls us to serve one another, to shed our cultural programming enough that we can follow, that we can go where he calls us to go, to love who God calls us to love, and to imitate the Christ,

who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be [grasped,]
7 but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
8 he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross. (Philippians 2).

And all God's children said... Amen.

Jesus Again Foretells His Death and Resurrection

(Mt 17:22–23; Lk 9:43b–45)

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

Who Is the Greatest?

(Mt 18:1–5; Lk 9:46–48)

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