

Compassion, Not Competition; Innocence, Not Insecurity

Mark 9:30-37

So, who *is* the greatest, anyway? Aren't you tired of hearing that, ad nauseum, when you engage the news or the sports page? We meet the disciples today traveling with Jesus through Galilee on the road to Capernaum. And we find out that they've been having the same argument we're always having. Who's the greatest? But that's nothing new – for any of us. Whether it's politics, sports, economics, or even religion, *competition* seems to be our default approach to all our relationships. Even my dog used to get insanely jealous if I would pay too much attention to my cat.

So today, we might be feeling just a little unsettled by the way Jesus slices right through our self-centeredness. Ouch! “If you want to be *first*,” Jesus says, “then go to the *end* of the line, and *help* someone.” What? You've got to be kidding. You know, Jesus is in good company here. If there is one notion that is central to *all* the great religions, in fact, it is, ironically, *compassion* and *not* competition. The sacred scriptures of the Hindus, Buddhists, Moslems, Jews and Christians *all* speak about God as the God of compassion. The people of faith who truly practice these religions proclaim compassion, not competition, as God's way.

Compassion has emerged as one of your core values. Compassion literally means to be with others when and where they suffer, to willingly enter into a fellowship of the weak – that's *God's* way to justice and peace among people.

And then to bring his point home big time (or maybe to confuse us even more) Jesus picks up a child, and holds it in his arms in the midst of them and he says, “If anyone welcomes one child like this in my name, they welcome me.” Yet in the ancient world, unlike today, apart from normal family affection, children were not rated very highly. They had no status or prestige at all. The point is, we're not going to gain any particular favor or social standing because we're followers of Jesus! To the contrary.

So why bother? Well, the game's been changed today. The paradigm has shifted. It's about compassion, not competition. Believe it or not. Whoever welcomes the most helpless, the most vulnerable, the weak, the least of these, welcomes our very God. And that speaks to inclusivity, which has also emerged as one of your core values.

There was an African American man who was a very devout Christian. Like a young child, somehow he was innocently – or maybe naively - unaware of the prejudices held against him. (Personally, I don't believe how that could be possible. But that's the way this story is told.) He applied for membership in an exclusive white church. The pastor attempted to put him off with all sorts of evasive remarks. The old man began to realize he was not wanted. Finally, he said he would pray on it and perhaps the Lord would tell him just what to do. Several days later he returned. The minister asked, “Well, did the Lord send you a message?” “Yes sir, he did,” was the answer. “The Lord told me it wasn't any use. The Lord said, “*I've* been trying to get in that same church *myself* for ten years, and I still can't make it.” The game's been changed. It's about compassion, not competition.

In Mark's gospel we get an intriguing picture of discipleship – another core value that has emerged in your process of discovery. The disciples are called and commissioned by Jesus; they're given special instructions at various points in their association with Jesus, they're privileged to share intimate moments in his ministry. *And* they're so very human: they say inappropriate things. They keep children away from Jesus. They are anxious when they should be sleeping and they sleep when they should be anxious. Continually they misunderstand what Jesus is teaching and doing. Good grief! Jesus tells them he's going to be killed, and in three days raised. They don't get what he's talking about, they're too afraid to ask him what he means, and so they argue amongst *themselves* about who is the greatest. Mark kind of lowers the bar for us. Maybe *he's* trying to demonstrate compassion and not competition.

The word disciple does not mean to be “a student of a teacher.” It means to be “a follower after somebody,” which can also imply one who has not yet arrived. Discipleship means journeying with Jesus, being on the road with him. It means listening to his teaching, sometimes understanding it, sometimes not quite getting it. It can involve denying him, even betraying him. The journey is in his company, in his presence, where there is joy. Discipleship means eating at his table and experiencing his banquet. That banquet is an inclusive banquet. It includes not just me and not just us, but those we tend to exclude. It means being nourished by him and fed by him. It’s not just an individual path, but a journey in community, balancing individuality and togetherness. It’s not so much about believing or being good but about a relationship with God. And it is a journey from the competition of *this* world, to the *compassion* of life in the kingdom of *God*.

Easier said than done, you know. How do we access that spirit of compassion in a world that bombards us and overwhelms us with the spirit of competition? I came across some help from Henri Nouwen, that Roman Catholic spiritual giant. That Jesus lifts up a child to make this point reminds me of what Henri Nouwen calls “the place of innocence.” He says that is the place where *Jesus* chose to live. It is a place that isn’t wounded by sin. “It’s a place where Jesus made his home and asks me to make mine,” Nouwen says. “Can I live innocently on this planet in the years ahead? Can I choose to make my *innocence* my home, think from there, speak from there, act from there? It is a hard choice,” he says, “because my insecure self wants so much to be part of a world that controls, competes, rewards, and tells me whenever I am good or bad. But I can go beyond that insecurity and discover my sacred center, fashioned in secret and molded in the depths of the earth.”

I have to trust that whenever I *speak* from the place of innocence my words will heal, that whenever I *act* from the place of innocence, my actions will bring forth life. I know that every time I choose for my innocence, I don’t have to worry about the next ten years. I can simply be where I am, listening, seeing, touching in the very moment, always sure that I am not alone but with him who called me to live as God’s child. For the innocent ones there is nothing to fear. They will see God wherever they are.”

So, to the child in each of you, you will never be greater than you are right now. No mask you may wear to compete in this world will ever hide the eyes of innocence God cherishes in you today. Whenever you see a baby, be reminded of that place where we connect most purely with God, that place of innocence in each one of us, that place of innocence in all those we may find it difficult to love or welcome right now. That place of innocence where masks of competition melt away. That place of innocence where Jesus meets us today as we gather at his table to be fed and nourished with his very body, with his very blood. AMEN.

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Sources:

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Henri Nouwen, Finding Our Sacred Center: A Journey to Inner Peace, New London, Ct., Twenty-third Publications, 2011, “The Grotto: A Call to Innocence,” pp. 30-40.