

Who's on First? - Rev. Denise Stone

Text: Mark 9:30-37

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH BIG FLATS NY, 9-19-2021

"Who's on First?" is a comedy routine made famous by American comedy duo Abbott and Costello. The premise of the sketch is that Abbott is identifying the players on a baseball team for Costello, but their names and nicknames can be interpreted as non-responsive answers to Costello's questions. For example, the first baseman is named "Who"; thus, the utterance "Who's on first" is ambiguous between the question ("Which person is the first baseman?") and the answer ("The name of the first baseman is 'Who'").ⁱ

Many, if not most of you, are familiar with this sketch. It is based on confusion resulting from words or names. This question of "Who's on First?" has been used in popular culture so many times that it is hard to count.

The question of "Who *IS* First," is markedly different from "Who's *on* First." It is this question, "Who is First" and the implications for following Jesus that I want you to listen for in today's Gospel Reading.

Hear Mark 9:30-37,

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.

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.”ⁱⁱ

The Word of the Lord **Thanks be to God.**

Today’s text is a continuation of a larger section in Mark where Jesus is teaching about what it means to be a disciple. This passage, which begins with Jesus’ prediction of his death and resurrection and concludes with a lesson about discipleship, sounds a bit like the themes from last week’s text.

While the themes are similar, what we learn from and about Jesus here are of increasing importance.

First, we see Jesus and the disciples traveling through Galilee. Unlike other times of travel, Jesus specifically doesn’t want anyone to know he is there. His focus is on teaching his disciples –

trying to prepare them to understand his impending death and resurrection.

Despite the focused attention from Jesus, the disciples still do not understand what he is talking about. Like Peter last week, the disciples cannot fathom a suffering Messiah. This time, however, no one asks any questions – they are afraid.

Why are they afraid?

The text doesn't tell us. We can speculate from the rebuke Peter received last week after confronting Jesus about the suffering Messiah information, maybe the disciples didn't want to be on the receiving end of Jesus' irritation or anger.

Perhaps it was the content of the information that provoked the fear. Jesus is telling the disciples that he is going to be given over to the religious and civic leaders and will be killed. And in three days will rise. As disciples of Jesus, if he is to be killed, what does that mean for them? Again, they seem to miss the piece about resurrection.

Whatever the reason, we know that the disciples are experiencing fear after hearing the message Jesus is telling to them.

We turn from “going through Galilee” to having a specific destination – Capernaum. Capernaum was like Jesus' home base. Once they reach the house, Jesus asks the disciples what they were arguing about on the way there.

For a second time, the disciples are silent. Previously, they were silent because they were afraid. Now, the text tells us that they

are silent because they had been arguing about who is the greatest disciple, or Who is First.

I wonder about their silence.

Were they embarrassed that Jesus called them out for their argument? Were they surprised that Jesus even knew about their argument?

Again, the text doesn't give us additional information about why the disciples were silent – only that it related to the argument they had been having.

Jesus then calls the twelve to come closer so that he can give additional teaching on this topic.

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

This is a strange teaching.

Now we have heard “the first shall be last and the last shall be first” so many times that it may have lost its impact.

Jesus' society was very similar to ours in this aspect – people want to succeed. People want to advance at their job or in the opinions of others. The idea of being a servant is counter-cultural.

Yet, Jesus is saying that if you want to be first, you must choose to be last and to serve others.

That is not how society works. I'm reminded of the commercial poking fun at Facebook, “that's not how this works, that's not how any of this works.”

This is a revolutionary idea.

No wonder the disciples are silent – Jesus has told them he is going to die (and as his disciples they might be assuming they have a similar fate) and now Jesus is telling them not to seek success as they have understood it, but to do the opposite.

To emphasize this teaching, the Message translation tells us of verses 36-37,

³⁶⁻³⁷ He put a child in the middle of the room. Then, cradling the little one in his arms, he said, “Whoever embraces one of these children as I do embraces me, and far more than me—God who sent me.”

Again, the frequency of having seen Jesus with children, the Sunday School pictures of many of our childhoods, we might miss the impact of this part of the text.

Children had no standing in Jesus’ day and time. Even less than they do today. Children were property of the father. They really did not contribute to the family’s bottom line. They had no power, and they brought no power to others.

“Whoever embraces one of these children as I do embraces me, and far more than me—God who sent me.”

This is again a revolutionary idea.

To be a disciple of Jesus, you must pay attention to those who cannot give you anything in return.

Joyce Ann Mercer [in her book, *Welcoming Children*] suggests that Jesus' treatment of children shows his "struggle and resistance to the purposes of empire." Imperial politics favors relationships of power and privilege, while the politics embodied here lifts up the lowly, those with no power or privilege. Jesus first calls the disciples to emulate the child, thus renouncing social status; he then calls them to welcome the child, to make space for those with no social status, since to do so is to welcome Jesus himself – and the one who sent him.ⁱⁱⁱ

What does our text tell us for today? Is it just as relevant?

Last week the text asked of us if we really wanted to follow Jesus – to truly be a disciple.

This week the text extends that question – if you really want to follow Jesus – are you willing to put the needs of others first?

Are you willing to pay attention to and care for those who have nothing to offer you? No matter the cost?

How you do that is the next question.

If you really want to follow Jesus, and you are willing to give up being first, what do you do?

Jesus here says to honor children as worthy of your time and attention – for they are so worthy.

- Be a mentor,
- go read to children at a school or library,
- plan to be part of our *Trunk-or-Treat* event next month.

The giving of our time and attention is not limited to children. I've suggested several times of actually volunteering at the community kitchen or the Samaritan Center (not just making donations).

Perhaps your call to follow Jesus is to share your faith with your family or friends and neighbors – inviting them to join you in worship or service.

Of this passage, Professor Sharon Ringe says,

...it is a powerful and even shocking depiction of the paradoxical values of God's will and reign, which confront the dominant values of human societies and assign worth and importance to every person.^{iv}

Every person has worth and importance.

Every disciple of Jesus Christ is called to recognize and honor each person's worth and importance.

The idea of the first being last and the last being first is revolutionary.

A quote I found attributed to Navjot Singh Sidhu says, A Revolutionary Idea is usually one with its sleeves rolled up.

Who's Truly First? The one who hears and answers God's call to live life differently than the world.

Let us pray.

God of unsearchable mystery and light,
your weakness is greater than our strength,
your foolishness brings all our cleverness to naught,
your gentleness confounds the power we would claim.
You call first to be last and last to be first,
servant to be leader and ruler to be underling of all.
Pour into our hearts the wisdom of your Word and Spirit,
that we may know your purpose and live to your glory.
Amen.^v

ⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Who's_on_First%3F.

ⁱⁱ Scripture quotations from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible are copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. and are used by permission.

ⁱⁱⁱ Feasting on the Word, pg. 96.

^{iv} Feasting on the Word, pg. 97.

^v <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/search/label/Proper%2020%20B>. From Revised Common Lectionary Prayers copyright © 2002 Consultation on Common Texts admin. Augsburg Fortress. Posted on Thematic, Intercessory and Scripture Prayers for the RCL, Vanderbilt Divinity Library. <http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/>.