

“Who’s number one?”

September 20, 2009

Text: James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a, Mark 9:30-37

I.

It’s hard to be an American and grow up in American culture and not be all caught up in success and achievement. To succeed and achieve ... to win and be *number ONE* earns front page headlines and the accolades of a dotting media and an adoring fan base.

Our culture places enormous emphasis on winning. Now, don’t get me wrong; winning has its place ... and I’d be the last person to debunk winning when winning means *trying hard* and putting forth the effort to where the best is drawn out of us. But still, sometimes, we go a little nuts with our winning, don’t we?

Sometimes our obsession with winning becomes unhealthy to the point where we lose sight of the BIG PICTURE ... of what’s really important ... what the object or goal is to begin with.

Do you notice our obsession with rankings? In America, we’ll rank anything, even the Chili at our Chili Cook Off competition, coming up in October. Most of us here this morning can probably remember our class rank in high school. We’re into rankings, aren’t we?

We even describe people by their rankings. When we visited the Museum of American History in Washington D.C. in early August when we were visiting our daughter, Erica, there was this display where they asked you to rank the top Presidents of all time. Of course it was Lincoln and Washington, followed usually by FDR. We like to rank and rate things don’t we?

In tennis, we’ll say, he/she is top 20, or top 10, or, better yet, top 5; imagine that, top five in the world. We know certain athletes by where they rank in income ... and certain corporations or companies by where they rank in profits.

II.

Being *number ONE* in anything in life is certainly an admirable thing.

Being *number ONE* in your class or the number ONE chair for the violin or clarinet in the band at school. Or the number ONE team in anything, be it NCAA football or basketball. And, certainly, winning the World Series or the Super Bowl are great achievements and they’re particularly great when it’s our team.

But there’s a whole lot more to life than being *number ONE*. There are a lot of number

2's or 3's ... or 102's or 103's that are impressive too. Too great an emphasis on rank and rating doesn't tell the full story and often distorts things to the point where we lose sight of what's really important. And what's important is that our best is drawn out of us and that the gifts that God has given us are given full expression.

Still, we want to know *Who's number ONE?* This even spills over into our obsession with superlatives. The next time you listen to TV or the radio, check out the free and flippant use of superlatives.

That was the most homeruns hit in a month since 2006 ... or the most touchdowns thrown in a game since 2007. Or the hottest day since July of 2004 ... or the most hurricane activity since 2005. Whatever it is! Who cares? It was only a short time ago.

We can understand all of this, up to a point. But we're forever taking it to new levels to where superlatives lose their meaning.

III.

According to our reading this morning from **Mark 9**, the disciples, were apparently concerned about rankings. When Jesus was trying to talk to them about the deeper matters of life—questions of life and death and how he (Jesus) was going to be betrayed and killed, they seemed confused by it all ...

They were probably into more than a little denial, which in a way is understandable. If you think about it, how could they be expected to comprehend it all, that side of the resurrection. It was too much. And why did Jesus have to die?

Then, later, perhaps trying to figure out what this all meant for them, Jesus overheard them arguing among themselves about who was the greatest? They were probably wondering (worrying, even) about what was going to happen to them—with Jesus dying and rising again.

At another point, John and James tried to convince Jesus to grant that, in Jesus' glory, one of them could sit at his right hand and the other at his left. Jesus explained to them that it was not that easy, and it wasn't his decision anyway; and such considerations had a lot to do with having a humble spirit and a readiness to serve others.

Who's number ONE? The disciples were concerned about where they ranked and what would happen to them. What did it all mean? And what would happen to them?

IV.

Of course, what all this is about is that, at the end of the day, it's not about rankings or ratings. It's about what's in the human heart and spirit. Do we think God really cares

much about who's number ONE ... and about all our earthly accolades and successes?

Do we think God is concerned much about how much money we make, where we rank at work ... whether our children can walk early, talk early, read before their peers or anything else?

Perhaps it's not so much that God doesn't care. It's just that these probably aren't God's primary concerns. To help his disciples understand, finally, Jesus sits them down and says to them: ***Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.***

This must have been a teaching or an awareness that Jesus felt strongly about because it's repeated, in one version or another again and again ...

After Jesus rebukes Peter for getting upset when Jesus talks to the disciples about his suffering and death, Jesus says, ***For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.***

When the disciples are frustrated and perplexed over what Jesus says about earthly riches, Jesus reminds them: ***But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.***

All the time, with Jesus, we have these reversals. ***Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.***

V.

Again, we're called to serve. And Jesus somehow knows that we have a whole different perspective on serving when we're at the end of the line. At the end of the line, we see things better ... more clearly ... we see the whole line in front of us.

It's like flying first class. Now I admit that there's part of me that would love to be sitting in one of these big comfy seats in the front of the commercial airliners when I fly ... and the one time we flew first class (got upgraded, actually, on a transatlantic flight), it was super ... loved the service.

But still, sitting where I normally sit when I fly ... which is in the middle or the middle back or the back back, I see a whole lot more of what's going on. In the back of the line or the back of the plane, we see the humanity of those in front of us.

If we're always in the front of the line, always the first for this and the first for that, we don't see the day-in-day-out humanity of our human situation.

We don't see the little ones ...

- the ones that struggle every day to make it through another day of life ...

- the ones who are so accustomed to being left out, taken for granted, or taken advantage of in whatever way. We don't see them.
- The ones who have to go to the emergency at the hospitals for health care because they can't afford health insurance ...
- the ones who can't afford to pay their monthly mortgage payment because they lost their job and the money is just not there ...

When you're unemployed or underemployed, it's humiliating.

1. When you have to choose between paying your rent and paying for the medication you need but can't afford, it's humiliating.
2. When you have to ask for food stamps or help from the local food pantry again and again, it's humiliating.

To be in these circumstances through no fault of our own ... through nothing that we did ... and particularly when, everyday, we've done our best to do the right thing—to be responsible, to work hard, make good choices and still ... the door is closed and the no vacancy light is on, it's humiliating.

The Bible knows. Jesus knows.

If we want to be the greatest, if we want to walk in the light of the holy and serve the living Christ, we have to humble ourselves and serve and care ... and be people of compassion ... people who really feel the struggles and the anguish of those around us.

VI.

Who's number ONE?

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

Immediately after Jesus says this—to make sure we GET IT—Jesus calls a child to come to him ... and taking the child in his arms, Jesus says,

Whoever welcomes one such child in my name, welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not me but the one who sent me.

We're supposed to take care of the children. But of course, we know that. It's built into our DNA. But there's a deeper point here. The child is a symbol of the little ones of the earth ... of the vulnerable ones ... the ones that need an advocate ... that need someone to go to bat for them. In Jesus' day, those were the orphans and the widows; again, the vulnerable ones.

In our day, it's the ones who don't have jobs, the ones who lack adequate health care and the ones who have been beaten down by the storms of life—with an unanticipated illness, for example, or a random accident.

Do we know what it's like to be vulnerable? We might. I found out anew last Friday morning when Yvette and I were departing Ft. Lauderdale International Airport on Spirit Airlines flight #758. We we're going to New York for the Memorial Service of my son-in-law's mother who died in late August.

We're about ten minutes in the air, out over the ocean when, suddenly, there's some smoke in the cabin ... not a lot of smoke, but smoke nonetheless. And although it seemed to go away, you could smell it. And suddenly, the flight attendants are in high gear ... one's on the phone to the pilot ... and the next thing we know we're in descent and the captain's on the intercom: *Prepare for landing ...*

I have to tell you: the ten minute descent seemed like an eternity ... and, as you might imagine, a lot of thoughts go through your mind. At that moment, we were utterly vulnerable ... powerless, living on hope. That feeling of vulnerability, the feeling of powerlessness, is the feeling countless millions live with everyday ... hoping for a better day, for an open door, for a fresh glimpse of positive change.

VII.

Sometimes, no matter how hard we try, no matter how fervently we want to succeed, stuff happens and we fall on hard times. Do we have any idea how many good, hard working people are just a pay check or two from being homeless.

And so, Jesus calls us—in every season of the year—to be our brother's/ our sister's keeper ... particularly, again, the vulnerable ones. And it's when we truly welcome them and reach out to them and advocate for them ... it's then that we're number ONE in God's sight.

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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