

"WHO IS NUMBER ONE?"
(Sermon by Rev. Don Parsons)

Scripture Lesson:- Mark 9: 30 - 37

// Salvador Dali, the famous painter, once said this:-

"At the age of six I wanted to be a cook. At seven I wanted to be Napoleon.
And my ambition has been growing steadily ever since." //

The disciples are having a heated discussion. Jesus is aware of this, but as he seems to be walking on ahead, it is not until they reach the guest house in Capernaum that he raises the issue with them.

"Hey guys, what were you arguing about on the way?"

Well they kick the dirt floor with the toe of their sandals, don't say a word, avoid looking him in the eye, because on the way they had been doing a very un-Christ-like thing.

They had been arguing with one another about who among them was the greatest.

It's an insidious thing, isn't it? Ambition... ego... who is number one...
who gets to sit in the place of honour...

Oh, we admire people who take initiative, and show leadership, and seem to be genuinely interested in making a difference in life. We admire that.

And we need such folk in our society, and in our churches.

But if you are like me you are also a bit uncomfortable with people who always have to be centre stage; those who, like adolescents after a big win, dance around the field and get in the face of their dejected opponents chanting "We're number one! We're number one!"

People whose goal is always to be at the top of the ladder and who will do anything to get there - well, such folk make me a bit uneasy.

And yet jostling for position seems to be part of the human psyche.

// Just observe a school playground at recess and you will notice how children from a very young age know who is "in" and who is not.

I see it on the QEW all the time - the way drivers weave in and out, back and forth... Why?

To be out front, to get there first.

I will admit that I smirk when traveling only a few kilometers over the speed limit eventually pull onto the off-ramp, and there, waiting at the traffic light right ahead of me is that yahoo who roared by me across three lanes of traffic fifteen kilometers earlier. //

Sometimes we find the jostling for status even in the church. It is hard not to compare one congregation with another, each trying to be the friendliest, the most active, the largest, the most generous.

// I'm guilty of that.

When I was minister of Port Nelson in Burlington, at each presbytery meeting, when the Stewardship Committee circulated the sheet listing all the pastoral charges and their givings to the Mission & Service Fund, I was always anxious to see where our congregation fit into all of that.

And I will confess that I felt a bit smug every time we were at the top of Halton Presbytery in our support of M&S.

There are moments when I am right there with the disciples arguing about who is number one! //

// I will even admit to you that I speak enthusiastically – o.k., I brag about Eglinton St. George's to my friends who are astounded that Marg. and I make the drive from Burlington so we can savour the ministry of this place -- terrific staff, exceptional choir, gracious and friendly congregation.

Proudly I tell others about the smorgasbord of opportunities which are offered in this year's Program Guide, and the way we seek to be a congregation with "open doors, open minds, open hearts."

I am grateful that a few minutes ago, in the act of re-covenanting, we committed ourselves to this "game plan" for the coming year;

and promised "to support the church by responding to its needs, while growing in faith, hope and love..."

These are not just frivolous words.

They express a relationship we agree to share with God, with each other, and with our world. //

// John Sentamu, the Anglican Bishop of York in England recently said that

"It is not the church of God that has a mission; but the God of Mission who has a church." //

I am grateful that at some level, we here at Eglinton St. George's have caught the vision of that, and that we as a congregation are willing to offer our life and work to "the God of Mission".

All of which is to say that it is not difficult to be proud of, and to speak enthusiastically about this church. We just need to guard against the arrogance that assumes that we have it made, and that "we're number one!"

"What were you talking about on the way?" Jesus asked his friends.

And they were embarrassed, because they had been arguing about who among them was the greatest. Even these who are with Jesus 24/7, are guilty of jostling for position, elbowing each other for status in the group.

And then Jesus, knowing exactly what their animated conversation has been about, sobers them with this zinger:- "You know," he says, "whoever wants to be first, must be last, must be servant of all."

And then to make his point, he opens his arms to a child playing in a corner of the room.

She runs over, they hug each other, he bounces her on his knee, tickles a rib, laughs when the giggles fill the room, and says, "Whoever receives one of these children receives not only me, but the One who sent me."

"Let the children come to me," he once said loud enough for all the pompous adults to hear. "Do not keep them away. For these children are the first citizens in the kingdom of God."

Most of us understand why Jesus would say something like that.

// Very few of us agree with W. C. Fields when he muttered that "any man who hates dogs and children can't be all bad." //

We don't agree with that, because like Jesus, most of us delight in little children.

We open our hearts to them;

we scramble for the best seats on a Baptism Sunday so we can see the babies,
 and are always front and centre for the Christmas Pageant. We delight in our kids.
 We admit that there is nothing more beautiful than the image of an infant sleeping,
 or the music of children's giggles;
 and that there is nothing more full of pathos in life than a child in distress.
 We can understand why Jesus said what he said as he invited the kids to scramble up into his lap.

But as several New Testament scholars have pointed out, we also need to be careful here.

For there is a more serious sub-text to this passage than simply glorifying childhood.
 Truth is that in that age, and in that culture, children were of little value.

They were often regarded as a burden – dependent, helpless, non-productive.

Only when they could contribute to the welfare of their families, did children have worth.
 So when Jesus makes them number one – goes against the conventional attitude -- we need to pay
 attention. Those whom the world regards as “first” -- the powerful, the elite, the ambitious,
 those who flaunt their influence in society – they will find themselves at the back of the line.
 And those whom everyone regards as last – which is to say children, the poor, the outcast, the
 hungry, the vulnerable and marginalized of the earth – they will be way up front.

Jesus is trying to open us to a new way of being in our world.

We know well about the values that seem to shape our society – that if we are to survive and
 thrive, we must look after own interests, jostle with elbows up if need be to make sure we
 get our fair share. Disciples arguing about being number one is a snapshot of that.
 But if we are followers of Jesus, we are expected to shape our lives according to kingdom values –
 honesty, compassion, generosity, respect, caring, gentleness, forgiveness, love.

And Jesus suggests that it is the children in our midst who give us a powerful glimpse of what
 that might be like. So once again the gospel rubs up against the ways of the world.

// The scene was the Special Olympics that followed the 26th Olympiad in Atlanta, thirteen summers
 ago. As you know, the Special Olympics are wonderful games for those who are physically and
 mentally challenged.

The final in one of the races was into the last stretch. The finish line was clearly in sight,
 and the runners were putting out everything they had within them.

All of a sudden, the lead runner stumbled and fell. The crowd gasped.

But then, without a moment's hesitation, the runner right behind him slowed, and stopped,
 and helped the fallen runner to his feet, and they both resumed the race.

But all the other runners had already passed them, and finished.

These two who for most of the race had been first and second now cross the finish line together,
 last in the race, but receiving the largest roar of those in the stands.

Though they were last, they had somehow become first. //

The world says that falling may be one of the risks of running hard, and if you want to win, you ignore
 what has happened and keep on going. Pausing to help means you come in last...
 which is to say... first...

May I suggest that is a glimpse of what Jesus had in mind in his conversation with the disciples?

I suspect that is the way God dreams life can, and ought to be lived, even in our own world, today...
 Amen.

