

Seeing Value in EVERYONE'S Face  
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Last year, I went fishing after a very long leave of absence. It was a glorious afternoon spent on the banks of the Deschutes River, fly fishing, for the first time in my life! It was a most memorable day! The water was crystal clear, the sky a miraculous blue, and the fish were running and hungry. I even caught a couple of fish thanks to the expertise of my very patient guide, a friend I have known for some time.

I learned something that day, fishing isn't necessarily about rest and relaxation. Or, bringing home the main course for that matter. It's a competition between fish and fisher. It is an aquatic battle that reflects a more subtle competition.

You see, in the world of fishing there exists a type of hierarchy, clearly delineated, though not widely known; A social strata of fisher people. I remember reading the classic, *A River Runs Through It*, and learning that at the very bottom of the hierarchy reside those who cast their lines with a worm attached hook and a bopper. I am almost embarrassed to admit that this is where I have spent the majority of my angler days. Oddly enough, I was happy back then. Ignorance is bliss I guess!

Now at the top of this hierarchy resides the fishing elite, the fly fishers, who catch and release their fish, and who tie their own flies. I was in the company of the latter a year ago and it did make me feel a bit special! Though I must admit it felt rather silly to go to all that trouble to catch the fish and then just let the darn things go!

Isn't it funny how we do that? Separating ourselves into various categories, different levels to help us recognize and solidify status, reflecting a secret desire to be part of, or seen as, one of the best? You see this tendency everywhere: among siblings, with co-worker, in education I dare say, and look at the world of athletes it is all about being the best of the best isn't it?

Even churches. My mother-in-law is visiting from Nashville, which is home to a plethora of mega Churches. I have never seen such big church buildings! There are several being built right now in her county that are absolutely huge and somehow it feels less about glorifying God than making a social statement.

Giving into the desire to be seen as bigger or better or even the best is nothing new. You see it clearly in this morning's scripture passage.

I love how the Disciples refused to answer Jesus when he asks, "What were you arguing about back there?" Suddenly everything goes quiet! They refused to tell him because they knew he would not approve, it went against everything he was teaching, everything he was striving to achieve. They knew that having such a debate was contrary to the life he was trying to lead them toward. They knew this, they just couldn't help themselves. Jesus was trying to help them be fishers of people and they had their goals set on catching and releasing for the betterment of their own egos.

Stephen Lewis, president of the Forum for Theological Exploration, asks, "What if greatness looks totally different to God than our aspirations and practices of greatness?" He goes on to say, "While we all have a deep longing to discover the answer to that question, the more important question might be: Will we muster the courage to live into the answer?"

In our lesson, we find Jesus schooling the disciples on what greatness looks like in his ministry. He says to the disciples, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all." Notice, he does not say do, but be, which raises two questions regarding identity. Who must we be as a result of our participation in Jesus' ministry? Jesus says that we must be last. How do we live deeply into this collective identity of being last of all?

Perhaps the answer has less to do with one's position or station in life and more about seizing the opportunity to learn from those who have gone before us, in hopes of building upon their efforts and perfecting our collective efforts over time. Perhaps the answer lies in our efforts to be servant leaders practicing greatness, by being givers who serve together through shared leadership, responsibility and accountability.

In his book, *Servant as Leader*, Robert Greenleaf states, "A servant-leader focuses primarily on the growth and well-being of people and the communities to which they belong. While traditional leadership generally involves the accumulation and exercise of power by one at the 'top of the pyramid,' servant leadership is different. The servant-leader shares power, puts the needs of others first and helps others develop and perform as highly as possible." It is a way of leading that helps one see God's people through a new perspective.

In the passage, Jesus models what this type of leadership looks like for the disciples by showing them where they should focus their attention. He summons a young child to come to him.

In the Gospels, children symbolize the character a person must possess to enter the city of God (Mark 10:15). Yet, in spite of the symbolic status children hold, we find their voices silent for the most part throughout the Bible. Lewis suggests that children symbolize the voiceless, those at the margin of the community.

Jesus welcomes the child to the center of the community and wraps his arms around the child, the voiceless one, and suggests that if we want to be great, then we must practice welcoming the voiceless to the very center of the community. Expand the community's center to include those people at the margins. Even make the margins the new center of the community because this is where the welcoming presence of God dwells. In other words, to take the focus off of one's ego needs to see more clearly the value of all of God's children. This is a challenge people, because this is not the way of the world.

We are fully into the political run toward our next presidency, my least favorite season. Just this past week, one of the candidates, made a derogatory statement about another by saying, "Look at THAT face! Is that who you want to have leading this country?" No doubt this outrageous comment made by this candidate, whom I will not name this morning, was made because she was a woman, a woman who somehow did not reach the visual standard for women he held in his mind. Is this the best America has to offer? Are you as alarmed as I am?

Let me ask another and maybe tougher question, how often do we judge others by our own limited and limiting standards? Harboring prejudice against another for whatever reason? Seeing limited value or substance is easy to do when measuring another to some standard of measurement we have fabricated in our minds for our lives, don't you think? One of the most important aspects of being a servant leader is one's ability to focus attention on the beauty and worth of others and away from our desire to be seen as somehow better. To see the faces of ALL of God's children through God's eyes and to help every one of our brothers and sisters find or utilize their gifts.

This value is at the core of our faith. We celebrate a faith that believes in a God who has blown open the doors of convention to reveal the light and worth of ALL of God's children. So, Jesus brought the child

forward for a reason. Jesus always sought out the voiceless and those living in the margins of society and lifted them up as examples of faithfulness focusing on their God-given worth.

Jesus chose the disciples on purpose, they were not society's elite by any means. Jesus was saying to the world, look at their weather worn faces, these outcast, these second stringers, these common fishermen, they will lead you toward a closer relationship with our God. As a community of faithful people, doing our best to follow in the footsteps of the ones who have gone before us, let us live into the blessing of servant leadership.

For Jesus says that we must be last.

How do we live deeply into this collective identity of being last of all?

Will we muster the courage we need to live into the answer?

Let us pray

Gracious God, we long to know your Presence,

To feel the movement of your spirit.

Lead us, O God, into practices from which our spirits shrink because the demand is so great.

Give to us quiet confidence, to see and celebrate the gifts of others.

Let us be true to that which you have entrusted to our keeping,

The integrity of our own soul. For us, God, this is enough.

Amen.

Mark 9:30-37

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

<sup>33</sup>Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" <sup>34</sup>But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.

<sup>35</sup>He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." <sup>36</sup>Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, <sup>37</sup>"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."