

Pastor Colleen's Sermon of October 18, 2009

Grace, Peace and Mercy be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

In this morning's gospel James and John want to be first,
And they are not the least bit apprehensive about telling Jesus their aspirations...
As a matter of fact they are quite demanding...
"Lord, grant us to sit at your right and your left when you come into your kingdom."
That's a pretty specific demand...
They don't want to just be part of the pack...
They want the prestigious seats RIGHT next to their Lord...
They want to be seen first.

And this need to be first is pretty understandable by human standards
We can even empathize with these disciples because we
all want to be winners.....
We want the Blue Ribbon
We want to be first in line
First in our class
First to be dismissed
First to the buffet line
First in line for a promotion
We want to be first ...

When I was in high school I was on the track team.
When I joined the team as a freshman I did so because I was pretty good at several of the field events.
But my coach insisted that I had to try and find my place in one of the track events.
And so, because I had run cross country she suggested that I run the 2 mile race.
So I did.

And what I discovered early in my track career was that long distance running was not my gift.
I only ran cross country in the fall because it got me into shape for Basketball in the winter.
I didn't run because I had a passion for running... I ran because it kept me in shape.
My track coach did not understand this
And because I had to run "something" I just went along.

And race after race...
I did not come in first.
As a matter of fact...
Those who came in first, second, third, fourth... and even 8th....
Were all cooled off and putting on their sweats by the time I finished the two miles.
I hated the race.
I hated it because I consistently came in either last or almost last.

By the time those of us who finished last in the two mile race were rounding that last lap

The winners had time to run their cool down laps, change back into their sweats, and start the walk back up to the high school.
 It was embarrassing, exhausting, and very difficult to consistently finish at the end of the pack.
 Being last,
 being the bottom of the heap,
 being so far out of the competition that the competition doesn't even know you are there,
 is NOT the place any of us want to be.
 The American dream of "pulling yourself up by your bootstraps,"
 the "go-get-'em" spirit,
 is the hallmark of our society.
 The reward of hard work is to get ahead,
 get to the top,
 to be first in all you do.
 Second place is second rate.
 We all want to "go for the gold."
 We all want to win.

And in today's gospel, James and John wanted a piece of this winning spirit.
 As a matter of fact they want it so much they try to shake Jesus down.
 "Teacher we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you."
 Isn't that a shake-down?
 It's like that line from the Godfather...
 "I'm gonna make you an offer you can't refuse!"

They want to ensure for themselves the best seats in the kingdom.
 They want to sit at the head of the table,
 on the right and the left hand of Jesus himself.
 They want the honor that they think should come from following Jesus.

But instead of going along with their demands
 Jesus turns their request on its head
 Jesus commands his disciples to be different from the culture they live in
 Jesus wants them to understand that discipleship isn't about attaining a special place of great honor.
 Instead, discipleship is about embracing the identity of servant and offering service "to all."

Instead of teaching his disciples how to come in first
 Jesus challenges his disciples to embrace how to come in last.
 And that is really what we the church are to remember...
 For we the church,
 the Body of Christ on earth,
 aren't called to be "the first."
 We are instead challenged to be "the last."

But since we are immersed in a culture where winning is everything
 Sometimes it is difficult to embrace what being last looks like...

As Jesus' disciples what exactly are we supposed to be "last" at?

Well here are some suggestions...

We should be the last to leave the side of a sick friend's bed.

We should be the last to let a grieving spouse sit alone.

We should be the last to write off the children whose parents have failed them or thrown them away.

We should be the last to ignore the homeless camped out along our streets.

We should be the last to allow hunger to gnaw at the bellies of our neighbors.

We should be the last to shrug our shoulders at ongoing environmental pollution.

We should be the last to let despair grind down the powerless.

We should be the last to condone cruelty of any kind, to any living thing.

We should be the last to let human hatred triumph over divine love.

What if we...

The church...

The body of Christ...

The assembled disciples of Jesus...

What if we started to implement a theology of lastness

Where holding last place,

last ditch,

last stand options isn't a last gasp,

but is evidence of the first new deep breaths of the Spirit of Christ reborn in our midst?

Jesus told his disciples that they must be "slave to all."

And apparently the three letter word "all"

Is the secret to being last.

To be "slave to all" requires the incarnation of Christ in our lives every day —

As Paul wrote to the Phillipians...

"I can do **all** things through Christ who strengthens me"

Or as the gospel writer Mark said earlier in this chapter,

"for God **all** things are possible"

And that is really the secret...

That is really the Good news that Jesus is sharing with us here today...

In order to be slave to all

God needs to have our all...

We get so caught up in the race...

We put so much energy in trying to be first up the corporate ladder,

We work so hard at being the leader of the pack...

We forget... it's not about us!!

It's about Christ!

It's about the One who is always in the lead...

Cheering us on!

Guiding our footsteps...
 Lighting the way...
 Pointing to God!

Jesus gave us the best example of what being last looks like
 Jesus gave all that he had
 For us...
 He gave his very life...
 As a ransom for our lives...
 He gave God all he had...

And today Jesus calls us, as disciples, to give God our all...
 All our vengeance,
 All our cheating
 All our hatred
 All our greed...

All our worries
 All our bargaining
 All our control
 All our fear
 All our disappointment
 All our mistrust
 All our pain...

God wants all that we've got
 Nothing more... nothing less...

For when we give ourselves to God,
 What we find is our Lord can do great things through us and for us—
 Greater things than we can ever imagine.

All because
 God is love and love does not conquer but serves all.
 Striving to be first is all about us...
 Striving to be God's
 Well that puts God in charge...
 That puts us last...
 That puts us in the company of the one who ransomed his life for us all...
 And that is the company we should seek to finish with...

One quick story you may have heard before :
 Every year the Special Olympics takes place
 And one year there was a race and all the contestants started at the sound of the gun...
 In the middle of the race one of the contestants fell down....

The other athletes who were running in the race saw their fellow racer fall and each and every one of them stopped running...
Went back to the racer that had fallen,
Helped the person up
And all the racers ran across the finish line.... Hand in hand....
In that race no one finished first and no one finished last....
Instead they finished the race together....
In service to one another....

Living as a disciple means it is never about us
It is never about how we can come in first.
Living as a disciple is about keeping our focus on God
Keeping our eyes focused on Christ.
It is about giving God our all...
All our heart,
All our strength,
And all our mind.

For when we are giving God our all...
We find we are no longer striving to be first
Instead we find that here at the back of the pack...
We can see with new eyes...
We can offer our very selves to our neighbor,
We can truly love all
And serve all
Amen

May the peace of God which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen

