

## *Servants of All*

### Mark 9:33-37

*Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."*

### Mark 10:35-45

*James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."*

*When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."*

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Our two stories from Mark could be episodes from a reality TV show called "Stupid Disciple Tricks." These guys aren't shining examples of faith just the opposite. They're "duh-ciples" spelled D-U-H. In Mark, they're usually timid, perplexed and inept, especially when Jesus tries to teach them something important. Today we see them playing dumb games like "Who's the Greatest" and "Who Gets the Best Seat?"

In our first story, the duh-ciples get caught them playing "Who's the Greatest" on the road to Capernaum. Jesus knows they're doing something stupid, so he asks, "What were you arguing about on the way?" No one says a word. If you ever got caught passing a note in school, you know how they felt.

They were fighting about who was the best, who was the most faithful, who was most-likely-to-succeed. Peter, James and John were considered the odds-on-favorites. They were closest to Jesus and got invited to go places with him without the others. Peter thought that he was a shoo-in since he called Jesus the Messiah first. But the others reminded him that Jesus called him Satan and told him get to back of the bus.

The duh-ciples play this dumb game because they don't like Jesus talking about suffering, dying and rising. They don't understand, because it doesn't fit their preconceived notions of a conquering Messiah. They're scared and try to get as far away from the truth as possible. So, they play their stupid game. Who's first? Who's best? Who's greatest? When you're scared of something you don't understand, you pretend nothing's wrong. You change the subject. You talk about something that makes you feel safe and secure.

In our second story, James and John play an even stranger game. It's a weird version of musical chairs called "Who Gets the Best Seat." In musical chairs there's only one winner sitting down at the end. James and John envision two winners sitting close to Jesus - one at his right and the other at his left. They're jockeying for positions of power and influence in the coming Kingdom. They want to get their prized seats before the others know what's happened. But when the other duh-ciples hear about their preemptive move, they get angry.

James and John play their stupid game because in the first-century social status is a matter of life and death. Class and social rank determine your living conditions, educational opportunities, physical survival and eternal future.

There are also spiritual implications. Popular theology said seating arrangements in heaven are determined by one's social ranking on earth. Those with the highest social ranking will be seated closer to God and occupy the seats of honor at the heavenly banquet. Those who are less significant or important might not even be invited.

Jesus tells the duh-ciples they have to redefine greatness. They have to realign their concept of success and achievement. Jesus turns everything upside down about what it means to be upright and upstanding. Instead of glorying in his leadership, assuming sweeping authority, flexing his messianic muscles, Jesus lauds servanthood and insists, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

The Greek term Jesus uses for servant is *diakonos*. It means service performed out of personal devotion. It isn't the enforced servitude of a slave or the service-for-hire of priests or soldiers. Jesus says servants act in and out a sense of love and compassion. They reach out to the left out, left behind, left standing, and left over.

Who comes to mind when you think about servants? One of my favorite story is about Leon Query, an elder in my first congregation in Concord, NC. He grew up on a farm and worked in cotton mills most of his life. He was a regular, blue collar kind of guy, who loved the church deeply.

Once a month, Leon drove over to Joe's house and spend the afternoon "chewin' the fat" as they say in NC. Joe was one of our "shutins" who spent most of his time in bed or a wheel chair or lazy boy recliner because of his disability. He couldn't care for himself anymore. His wife waited on him constantly and the home healthcare nurse came by weekly to help out.

Leon practiced being a servant by cutting Joe's toenails. He said that they were tough and hard and yellowed beyond belief. They weren't something most people wanted to see, much less touch. Leon said he had to use a pair of pinking shears, because regular toe nail clippers wouldn't work. It took every bit of strength in his rugged old hands to do it. I asked him once why he did it. Leon said, "Nobody else would - besides didn't Jesus say something about being a servant?"

Another of my favorite servant stories is about Davis, a leader of the Village Presbyterian Church in Kansas City. When it was time for the every-member stewardship visitation campaign, a church leader named Davis agreed to pay Rebecca her a visit. She was on the church roll but never attended.

When he arrived at her house, Davis noticed her yard was unkept. The shrubbery was overgrown, and you couldn't see in the windows. When he knocked on her door, Rebecca opened it but left the chain on.

He said, "Good morning, I'm Davis. I'm from the church."

She replied, "I don't go to that church."

Davis said, "I know, but you are still part of our church family and I just wanted to come by."

"I don't go there," she insisted.

Davis noticed Rebecca had a coat on. It was a cold day. The temperatures hovered in the thirties. Rebecca was wearing a coat inside. She closed the door.

Davis' visit didn't go as planned, but he checked it off his contact list. He went to work and turned on the space heater under his desk to keep his feet warm. As that heater cycled on, he thought about Rebecca and her coat. At lunch he took the space heater back to her house.

"It's Davis," he said. "I'm from the church."

"I know who you are. You think I got Alzheimer's or something?"

"I thought you might want this heater."

Rebecca was silent for a long time.

"Could you show me how to turn it on?" she asked. "Sure."

Rebecca was a hermit and no one had crossed her threshold in years. She lived in a four-room house cluttered with the stuff of her life. Davis' initial assessment was correct: she had no heat and little food. She had been a professional dancer once, but any strength in her legs was long gone, and alcohol had taken its toll.

Davis plugged the heater in and showed her how she could take it to the bedroom at night. He left and thought he was done with his Christian duty. But he found himself stopping by again.

"Hi. It's Davis from the church."

"You want the heater back?"

"No, just checking."

He would stop by. "I have some groceries."

"It's Davis, from the church. I thought I would trim your shrubbery."

Davis said he never intended to keep showing up at Rebecca's house. But he would be on the way to Home Depot or to the grocery store, and before he knew it, he was on her street. He would be clearing the dishes from his family's table and wonder if she had eaten. He would be repairing the sink in the bathroom and wonder if she needed something fixed. So, he just kept stopping by and doing little things for her.

Three years after Davis' initial visit, there was a memorial service for Rebecca at the church. There was no family, only a handful of church folks came. Davis was there. In her simple will Rebecca left her savings account to the church: \$3,211. Her note said, "I want the church to have this, because when everyone else had, that man from the church wouldn't leave me alone."

"Whoever wants to be great among you will be your servant. Whoever wants to be first among you will be the slave of all, for the Human One didn't come to be served but rather to serve and to give his life to liberate many people." (Mark 10:44-45)

In a moment we'll install Dee, Miguel and Lou Ann as church officers and servant leaders of this congregation. But they can't carry out Jesus' ministry by themselves. They need each and every one of us to be like Leon and Davis, to step up as we step down to serve. May we follow in Jesus' footsteps and become servants of all. Amen.

January 17, 2021 (Church Officer Installation)  
David Whiteley, Pastor  
Jemez Springs Community Presbyterian Church