

“Striving To Be Last”

Date 23 September 2018

Text: Mark 9: 33 – 37 Philippians 2: 5 - 11

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Eric Moussambani took up swimming in the year 2000, and later that same year he represented his home country Equatorial Guinea at the 2000 Olympics in the 100m freestyle swim race. He had never actually swum that far before. There were 3 swimmers in his preliminary round. The other two were disqualified because of false starts so “Eric the Eel” swam his heat alone. Now, Michael Phelps can swim 100m in 47 seconds. It took Eric Moussambani 1 minute 52 seconds, and the closer he got to the end the more he struggled. Some commentators that day were not kind, thinking it was ridiculous that a person with no ability at all was competing at the Olympics. The crowds reacted differently, however. The more Eric struggled the more the crowd cheered. As the only swimmer he won his heat, setting a world record for the slowest ever 100m freestyle. He didn’t win a medal, but he won the hearts of the crowd, and he became one of the stars of the Sydney Olympics. People appreciated his spirit and the joyous sense of victory Eric expressed for having finished his race! He did not go to the Olympics to show the world his swimming talent. He went to represent his country...to show that his tiny, impoverished, almost unknown country was a part of the world.

Jesus said, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all.” I don’t think Jesus had someone like Eric the Eel in mind when he said this. And neither do we. In our books you have to be better than the other guys in order to be first...and being first, of course, is much better than being last. Our family was at a church event years ago that featured a catered buffet dinner, and our youngest son decided to enact Jesus’ saying that the last shall be first. So he decided to be last in line. He was indeed last up to the buffet table...and there discovered that all the food was gone (not happy news for a teenaged boy). We know that there is typically no reward for those who come in last. But, like Eric the Eel, Daniel made out OK in the end as many people shared food off their own plates and Danny went home full. So, we not only appreciate the effort given by those who come in last, we also appreciate the thoughtfulness and sacrifice of those who come in last for the sake of others. And I think this is what Jesus was getting at when he talked about the last shall be first. Choosing to be last is a thoughtful, considerate, kind attitude that prompts a person to put the concerns of others before the concerns for self.

Apparently the disciples of Jesus were not getting this. Last week we looked at the moment when Jesus put his disciples on the spot, asking them, “And who do you say that I am?” When Peter answered, “You are the Messiah”, he was making the most dramatic, consequential statement a Jew could make. He was (in effect) saying, “You are the one we have been waiting for for 100’s of years, to come from God, to save us and bring in the age to come.” As a consequence, they apparently began to speculate on what that made them. They began to think, “If Jesus is the Messiah, that must mean that us disciples are pretty important too!” They were letting themselves be overcome by pride...and they took that even one step further. They even began to bicker among themselves, arguing who was more important in this august group of 12 followers of the Messiah! Jesus overheard them and again put them on the spot, asking, “What are you arguing about?” Busted! Embarrassed, they fell silent.

I think what lay behind all this was the disciples view on what you needed to get things done. You needed power. For them, that was the reality of their world, and it appears to be the reality of ours. For them and us, power comes in many forms: military might, wealth, political cache, reputation. Even having followers gives you power. A contemporary illustration of this.. Kim Kardashian is famous for being famous and she has 10’s of millions of followers on Twitter and Instagram. She was paid \$300,000 by a nightclub in Las Vegas just to visit once and let her millions of followers know that this was the kind of place she would go to. Being a celebrity brings power...and for the disciples that day they seemed to have been debating who benefited the most from Jesus’ celebrity rubbing off on them.

But Jesus quickly tried to dismiss that idea. In Mark’s account of Jesus’ life, immediately after Peter confesses “You are the Messiah!” Jesus told his followers for the first time what was to come: that he would be rejected by the religious leaders, beaten, killed, but then come back from the dead three days later. This was pretty astonishing to the disciples because a dead Messiah is powerless. Peter’s reaction was immediate. He took Jesus aside and rebuke him. “That can’t happen. You’re the Messiah!”. Use your power. And Jesus’ reaction? He saw Peter’s rebuke as a temptation. Yeah: I’ll bet Jesus could do a lot if he sought to bring change through power. Especially if you are the Son of God! But that was not his way. So he responded to Peter, saying: “Get thee behind me Satan! You are thinking the ways humans think, not the way God thinks.”

The way God thinks is captured beautifully in Paul's letter to the church in Philippi, where we read words very familiar to us. "Let the same mind be in you as in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on the cross" (Philippians 2). It is so counter-intuitive: the Son of God choosing humility over power as the means to change the world. Not by imposing change, but by serving people in a way that their lives might change. Jesus, choosing to give of himself for the sake of others, even if it meant his death.

And we get this, for we appreciate and value those who choose self-sacrifice for the sake of others. We award decorations to soldiers who risked their lives for the sake of their comrades. We honour individuals like Terry Fox who gave so much of his own time and effort to raise money for those who have cancer. We call such people "heroes." I once talked to a woman who had been a nurse during the height of the polio epidemic in Canada. At that time she worked in a polio ward in Medicine Hat. As we talked about that a question occurred to me. I asked, "How risky was it for your personal health to work with those who had polio?" She looked at me, silently, for a few moments and then quietly said, "for the entire time I worked on that ward, one out of every six patients had been my co-workers." Going back to those well-loved words about Jesus, that though he was in the form of God he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but he emptied himself, humbled himself, taking on human form to serve us. Then Paul has this to say to us in response. "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interest of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus."

Which was what was on Jesus' mind when he rebuked Peter and when he talked to his followers who were arguing about who was the greatest among them. "What are you arguing about as we are walking along?" He knew very well. He sat down, he called his disciples to sit down with him and he said, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." This was the attitude of that woman who had been a nurse in Medicine Hat caring for polio victims. She went to the hospital every day knowing that working on that ward could put her in an iron lung. But she let the same mind be in her that was in Jesus Christ and she put the welfare of her patients ahead of concern for self. What she (and the countless medical workers like her) did was heroic.

This attitude—being a servant to others...putting the needs of others before thoughts for oneself—this is a core attitude of missional congregations. Missional congregations say that they exist in a community for the sake of that community. A congregation moves towards a missional orientation the more it adopts as its point-of-view and priority how each congregant can grow towards a sense of calling to put others first.

This is the kind of Christianity that I was taught when I was a child. My mother died suddenly, unexpectedly when I was 11. And while we only had 11 years together she gave such a powerful witness to Christ—through her words and actions—that a faith was instilled in me of sufficient core certainty that it has been central to my life ever since. The Christianity that I saw in her was one of serving others. When the weather was bad (raining, snowing, bitterly cold) she would lay newspapers in the front hallway and then haul a chair from the kitchen to sit by the front door. Then, when the usual time was approaching, she would stand at the door, looking out the window, watching for the milkman—Mr. Green. When he arrived she would bring him in, serve him a cup of tea and a biscuit and provide a bit of a reprieve from the weather. Then she would do the same for the letter carrier. When I was old enough she recruited me to help in her work. One a blazing hot summer day I sat on our front porch watching men dig up our front lawn to lay down our street a pipeline to supply natural gas to the neighbourhood. My mum called me in then sent me out with a tray of glasses, then sent me out with a pitcher of lemonade. When the guys finished that off my mum sent me out with another. When I was a little older she got me started shovelling the sidewalks and driveways for two older widows who lived on our block. A milkman, a letter carrier, widows, ditch diggers...if you could help someone you helped them. My mum could see people we so easily overlook, see their needs and served them. She is a hero for me.

This is not how the world defines "hero", but the question is "who's definition do we want to live by?" Those who become servants of others are the first in God's eyes. So let us strive to be last...

