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Where You End Up

Mark 10:35-45

The story has been making the rounds on the internet for years and by now the primary point has been truly exaggerated. That is how I found it, but the author was considerate enough to include the origins of the story. According to folks at the Special Olympics Washington office, an incident happened at a 1976 track and field event held in Spokane, Washington. Nine contestants, all physically or mentally challenged, assembled at the starting line for the 100-yard dash. At the gun, they all started out, not exactly in a dash, but with a relish to run the race to the finish and win.

All, that is, except one boy who stumbled on the asphalt, tumbled over a couple of times and began to cry. One or two of the other athletes turned back to help the fallen boy, culminating in their crossing the finish line together. The others, however, continued to run their race, running as they had trained to do, striving to do their best. It is a touching story that reminds us of Jesus' words to be in service to others.

Individuals, ensembles, and teams all practice and train to win the game, the competition, the race, or whatever. We all enjoy winning, getting that ribbon, medal or trophy and our name in the press. Generally there is only one first place winner – it is rare to hear of a first place tie or two gold medals being given. Whatever the kind of competition it is, not everyone can win.

We also see in much of life people doing whatever they have to, to gain power, control, wealth, and more. We see it in corporate boardrooms, on the boards of directors of not-for-profit agencies, in political races, in the take-overs of governments and businesses, in gang turf wars, and even in churches from the local to the national and international levels. All of this is not new to our times – it has been going on for centuries. But we also all recognize the need for organizational structures, for leaders, bosses, coaches, chairs of boards, commanders, conductors – for someone or some small group to be in charge.

When we look at the leadership styles of our two stained glass figures for this morning we will see a notable difference. From many sources, we learn that Solomon was born into royalty and lived all his life in the palace. He was born in Jerusalem, David's son by Bathsheba. Reared as a royal prince, he ruled as king from 962-922 bce. His reign was marked by prosperity and prestige, grandiose building projects and cultural transformation.

As David was dying, the eldest of his remaining sons, Adonijah, tried to assume the throne. Solomon, supported by Bathsheba, the prophet Nathan, Zadok the priest, Benaiah the military commander, and David's bodyguard, was declared king by David. As a young and untried king, he acted with forcefulness in crushing the men who had turned against his father and those who remained a threat to his own rule. He consolidated his hold on the throne by having opponents, including Adonijah, put to death.

Early in his reign, while worshipping at Gibeon, God appeared to Solomon in a dream, telling him to ask for anything he desired. Solomon asked for an understanding heart, that he might be able truly to judge the people. God granted him this request. Most of Solomon's reign was peaceful and he devoted himself to the organization of his kingdom.

He built the Temple in Jerusalem, then a palace for himself, as well as fortifying cities in various parts of his realm. He was wise in his governance and surrounded himself with capable officials, many who had served his father. He maintained the army at full strength. Commerce

flourished and brought wealth to the kingdom. He built and maintained places for this commerce to happen peacefully. He pursued literary interests and many of the proverbs in the Bible are attributed to him. People came from many different places to hear his wisdom.

One could say that he started his reign with a leadership style more in tune with the words of Jesus. But two things in his life turned him into a different kind of leader. Solomon had a harem of 700 wives and 300 concubines. His first wife was the daughter of the Pharaoh of Egypt. And so began a pattern for him – marrying for the sake of political connections with other countries. Compromises had to be made. And with all these marriages came the religions of these wives. He had shrines built for the pagan gods and goddesses so his wives could continue to worship as they were accustomed to. And it is written of him that he began to worship at some of these shrines. His disloyalty to God brought upon him and his successor punishment from God.

Though temporarily successful, his grandiose governmental programs drained his subjects. Ambitious and selfish by nature, he engaged in establishing and keeping a lavish royal court, no matter the cost to his people. His luxurious lifestyle was expensive to maintain, with expenses regularly exceeding income. He divided the kingdom into 12 tax districts to centralize power in the crown by replacing the old tribal system with these 12 districts, each one responsible for supplying the needs of the court for one month each year. Solomon abandoned the administrative policies of David, who had respected the tribal divisions and the tribal representatives. Political centralization won out; a new wealthy class emerged, and the gap between the rich and the poor increased.

This social stratification was repugnant to those loyal to God, those whose faith was nourished by the Mosaic covenant embracing all Israelites as equals before God. Because his leadership was often more dazzle than substance, at Solomon's death the Israelite elders pleaded for a more tolerant rule. But his successor, his son Rehoboam, ignored these pleas, and the united monarchy was dissolved not long after he came to the throne. The successful rebellion of the 10 northern tribes strongly suggests the inadequacies of Solomon's reign and leadership style.

And from these same sources we learn about the prophet Isaiah. The book of Isaiah in the Bible contains few biographical details; but these do give us a picture of a prophet in the traditional pattern: a glimpse into the heavenly court; the giving of symbolic names to his two sons; dramatic appearances at the courts of the kings of Judah; prophesying through symbolic actions; performing miracles; and condemning injustices and oppression.

Isaiah was a prophet of Judah during the reigns of the Kings Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. It is generally acknowledged that the vision which he saw in the Temple in Jerusalem in the year that King Uzziah died, around 742, as told in Isaiah 6, marked his call to be a prophet. Faithful to his calling, he preached the word of God and fearlessly attacked the evils of people, not even sparing the kings – though it would seem that he was a man of position in the capital with access to the king and a voice in the affairs of state. He always was the moral conscience for the community.

In regard to political relations, he urged the kings and people to trust God and avoid entangling alliances with other nations, with earthly powers. He always insisted that Judah's destiny could be secured only by trust in God. As a man of deep religious conviction, he insisted on faith in God alone.

Isaiah also railed against religious hypocrisy, proclaiming that what the Lord wanted was not just rituals and prayers but simply that each person cease to do evil and learn to do good. He also preached against the greed and luxury of the establishment and the exploitation of the poor. He abhorred the ostentation and moral laxity he saw around him, especially at the royal court. His leadership style was truly that of a servant.

And so we come to the passage in the Gospel of Mark. Just before these verses, Jesus has been talking with his apostles about his suffering and death. And still the apostles, those whom Jesus lead, taught, worked with and mentored, continued in their pettiness and incomprehension, as is so often portrayed in this Gospel.

It would seem that within the group of 12 apostles there was an inner group of 3. On their own two of these, John and James, tried to pull off an end around against the other 10, and came to Jesus to request special places of honor in Jesus' realm. They obviously thought themselves somehow better than the others. In their failure to understand Jesus, their ambition was related to what they obviously still thought would be an earthly kingdom.

As one would expect, the other disciples were most resentful of the request of these two brothers – not only because each likely wanted the positions of power for himself, but also that James and John had made the request of Jesus before they had the chance to do so.

Jesus had to act quickly to make clear again the different standards of greatness in his realm and those in the realms of this world. Worldly greatness is most often based on wealth, power, control, and command. Jesus makes it clear that, for him, greatness is based on the standard of service. His followers are to ask, 'what service can I render', not 'what service can I expect from others.' Again, in the world, we race and strain to get ahead, to succeed, to gain honors, to be #1, to get that promotion, to gain that recognition and earthly fame. Yet as Christians, servanthood is to be the essence of our discipleship. As those who follow Jesus as our Savior and Lord, we are expected to practice and live out this servanthood in all of life.

William Barclay wrote that it is only when people are filled with the desire to put into life more than they take out, that is, to serve others, that life for themselves and for others can be happy and prosperous. And Wilfrid Harrington reminds us Jesus solemnly asserts that, in the community of his followers, there is no place for ambition, dominance or oppression. Yes, the church of Jesus is a human society and there is need for authority, there must be leaders and organization. But those who lead are to serve the others, their spirit of authority is to be one of service.

As I was thinking over this servant leadership that Jesus calls us to, the following story came to mind. Some of the internet listings I found for it claim that they knew it first from a book by M. Scott Peck *The Different Drum*. Before he writes the story, Dr. Peck lets us know that it is not a story he wrote, but that he cannot remember when, where or how he first heard or read it. It is called, "The Rabbi's Gift."

The story concerns a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. Once a great order, as a result of waves of antimonastic persecution in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the rise of secularism in the nineteenth, all its branch houses were lost and it had become decimated to the extent that there were only five monks left in the decaying mother house: the abbot and four others, all over seventy in age. Clearly it was a dying order.

In the deep woods surrounding the monastery there was a little hut that a rabbi from a nearby town occasionally used for a hermitage. Through their many years of prayer and contemplation the old monks had become a bit psychic, so they could always sense when the rabbi was in his hermitage. "The rabbi is in the woods, the rabbi is in the woods again " they would whisper to each other. As he agonized over the imminent death of his order, it occurred to the abbot at one such time to visit the hermitage and ask the rabbi if by some possible chance he could offer any advice that might save the monastery.

The rabbi welcomed the abbot at his hut. But when the abbot explained the purpose of his visit, the rabbi could only commiserate with him. "I know how it is," he exclaimed. "The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to synagogue anymore." So the old abbot and the old rabbi wept together. Then they read parts of the Torah and quietly spoke of deep things. The time came when the abbot had to leave.

They embraced each other. "It has been a wonderful thing that we should meet after all these years," the abbot said, "but I have still failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there nothing you can tell me, no piece of advice you can give me that would help me save my dying order?" "No, I am sorry," the rabbi responded. "I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you."

When the abbot returned to the monastery his fellow monks gathered around him to ask, "Well what did the rabbi say?" "He couldn't help," the abbot answered. "We just wept and read Torah together. The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving --it was something cryptic-- was that the Messiah is one of us. I don't know what he meant."

In the days and weeks and months that followed, the old monks pondered this and wondered whether there was any possible significance to the rabbi's words. The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks here at the monastery? If that's the case, which one? Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant Father Abbot. He has been our leader for more than a generation.

On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly Brother Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light. Certainly he could not have meant Brother Elred! Elred gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in people's sides, when you look back on it, Elred is virtually always right. Often very right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Brother Elred. But surely not Brother Phillip. Phillip is so passive, a real nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, he has a gift for somehow always being there when you need him. He just magically appears by your side. Maybe Phillip is the Messiah. Of course the rabbi didn't mean me. He couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? O God, not me. I couldn't be that much for You, could I?

As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah. And on the off, off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect. Because the forest in which it was situated was beautiful, it so happened that people still occasionally came to visit the monastery to picnic on its tiny lawn, to wander along some of its paths, even now and then to go into the dilapidated chapel to meditate. As they did so, without even being conscious of it, they sensed the aura of extraordinary respect that now began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery more frequently to picnic, to play, to pray. They began to bring their friends to show them this special place. And their friends brought their friends.

Then it happened that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while one asked if he could join them. Then another. And another. So within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order and, thanks to the rabbi's gift, a vibrant center of light and spirituality in the realm.