

Exactly Backwards
A Sermon on Mark 9:28-34 by the Rev. Philip Major
September 23, 2018 ~ St. Paul's Church ~ Syracuse, NY

There are two ways to proceed. There is our way and there is Jesus' way. The trick is that we often think we are following Jesus' way, when we are actually following our way. How do we know we are following Jesus' way?

We follow Jesus' way when we pay attention to the respect that is given to people. For Jesus, everyone gets respect: the Samaritan woman, the blind man, the tax collector and the poor widow who only had two cents to put in the offering. All of them deserve respect.

Jesus warns us that certain people in the church seem to be most concerned that they be treated as better than everyone else. In the Matthew 23 Jesus warns his disciples about following the way of an especially zealous group of religious leaders. Jesus says, *these religious leaders love to sit at the head table at church dinners, basking in the most prominent positions and getting called 'Doctor' and 'Reverend'.*

The topic of respect and humility is also in the center of our Gospel reading from Mark. *Jesus and his disciples were walking through Galilee. Finally they came to the town of Capernaum; and when he was in the house Jesus asked the disciples, "What were you arguing about on the way?" The disciples 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."*

This is Jesus' way. Those who are thought of as first must act like they are the last. Those who are given the positions of great power must be the servants of all.

We try to follow Jesus' way in the church. For example, in our processions into and out of the church the cross comes first. The cross is the central symbol of our faith and it deserves the place of greatest honor, so it comes first. In our procession the place of lowest honor is the end. That is why the priest is the last person in the procession, because, back in the olden days, the last person in the procession was usually the lowest slave or servant in the group. The priest takes the place of lowest respect, that is the last place, because we are trying to remind ourselves of Jesus' words: *"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."*

People get confused about this. Sometimes I think I should remind myself that being last in the procession is not supposed to be an honor. I would remind myself by crawling down the aisle on my hands and knees behind the people holding the cross and the gospel book and the other ministers, the same way a slave or servant might be forced to crawl behind the important members of a group.

You probably don't want me to do that. It's a shocking image, and that is Jesus' point. This is what Jesus means when he says, *"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."* When we follow our way the people in positions of greatest power get the most respect and the people in positions of least power get the least respect. But Jesus isn't following our way. Here, and again in chapter 10, Jesus says, those with greatest power must act as servants and those who have the least power must receive the greatest respect.<sup>[P]
[SEP]</sup>

In order to understand this it will help you to learn to speak Dinka. Dinka is the native language of our Sudanese members. When Lual and Mawut and Nyibol and our other Sudanese members talk to me they often refer to me as 'abuna'. This is the name for the priest in the Dinka language. Abuna means servant.

I often need to be reminded of this. Sometimes I think I should take a needle and thread and embroider the word 'abuna' onto my clergy collars. My clergy collars are made of white cloth. Sometimes I and the other people who wear these collars act like our ideas are the most important. But we are actually the servants. For me wearing one of these white collars actually means that my opinion is the least important opinion in the conversation.

Once again this is very different from the way people often think about the leaders in the church. This is exactly backwards from the way we normally think about things. For most people, the first will always be first and the last will always be last. For most people, the leaders in the church seem to wear

these collars to show that they have authority. But according to Jesus, the leaders in the church must act like they are the servants of all.

It is very difficult for us to understand this and very difficult for us to accept this. It was very difficult for Jesus' first disciples to understand. *Jesus and his disciples passed through Galilee. Jesus was trying to keep things quiet; for he was teaching his disciples about the path he had to follow. Jesus said 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." But the disciples did not understand what Jesus was saying and were afraid to ask him.*

The disciples do not understand and we do not understand. Jesus' way is so completely different from our way. The disciples were probably expecting Jesus would become more and more popular and powerful. According to them Jesus would have a triumphal entry into Jerusalem which would end with him be acclaimed as messiah and leader of all of the people. Perhaps the disciples thought Jesus would be given an extra special chair to sit in the Temple.

So they are completely confused when Jesus says, "I am going to be betrayed and put on trial and killed. Three days after I am killed I will rise again." According to Jesus the way of salvation requires suffering. According to Jesus there is no resurrection without betrayal and pain. According to Jesus there is no path to eternal life that does not somehow journey through death. This makes no sense to the disciples and it doesn't really make sense to us.

So we have plenty of crosses in our churches but we cover them with gold and jewels. When people see one of our crosses the most common response is: that is a really beautiful cross. We do not often say: now I understand, the way of salvation is going to have something to do with suffering.

We do not like suffering. We do everything in our power to avoid suffering. We do everything in our power to not see the way other people are suffering. We distract ourselves and try to ignore the reality of suffering. That is our way.

Jesus' way is exactly backwards from our way. Jesus' way is all about our suffering. Jesus' way is all about going to the places where people are suffering. It is about being with people who are suffering and trying to heal them. Jesus' way is about paying attention to suffering so we don't make stupid mistakes that cause other people to suffer.

We might think we are following Jesus' way, but in almost all cases we are actually following our way. Jesus' way is so much better. In our plan for the world the first are always first and the last are always last. In our plan for the world those with the most power will always be first, they will have the most respect and honor. Look around at what is happening in the world. Our way is not working.

Our way is not working, especially when it comes to suffering. We would do so much better if we followed Jesus. This is our reality. There is going to be suffering. This is our reality. We need something that looks like salvation. We need something that acts like salvation in our lives.

The cross means that it is only after we have endured suffering that we are in a position to experience the resurrection. The cross affirms that there is suffering in our lives but our suffering does not have to be meaningless. The cross means that God is with us in our suffering.

We really want life to be easier. Life isn't going to be easier. We really want to win. Life isn't going to be so simple. We really get confused about Jesus' way. When Jesus says "*Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.*" we often seem to think Jesus is talking about other people acting like servants. He is talking about us.

So when powerful people put themselves ahead of everyone else don't be confused and don't be discouraged. Powerful people have been doing that for a very long time. Make a clear decision for yourself about whose way you are following. Don't be afraid. Be strong as you take on the work of serving God's people. Know where your strength is coming from.