
BE SOMEBODY

Mark 10:35-45

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In the classic 1954 film, *On the Waterfront*, there's a scene in which an aging prize-fighter, played by Marlon Brando, looks back on his life and laments the fateful mistake he made early on by throwing a fight at the urging of some corrupt friends. Talking to his brother Charlie he says,

You don't understand. I coulda had class. I coulda been a contender. I coulda been somebody, instead of a bum, which is what I am, let's face it.

We all want to be Somebody. We want to feel that our lives are significant and important, that we are worthy people somehow.

This longing to feel worthy or significant leads most of us to develop different criteria for judging other people. We do it almost unconsciously, but deep down the purpose of these various ranking systems is to help us feel better in comparison to at least some of our neighbors. In the household I grew up in, where both my parents held PhD's, intelligence and academic ability were the measure of whether someone was a substantial person or not. I'm guessing we all have strategies for ranking ourselves against our neighbors. Right?

It's bit disconcerting, therefore, to find a whole series of passages leading up to today's reading from Mark, which record Jesus taking a wrecking ball to our usual criteria for affirming our own worth and significance.

Maybe we feel like we are Somebody based on special skills or abilities we can contribute to various groups. We are useful people to have around. Certainly this congregation is blessed with many people who have distinguished records of service in the church and other settings. Well back in chapter 9 Mark records an argument among Jesus' disciples about who among them was the greatest by this measure. In response Jesus lifts up a little child, who obviously has nothing to contribute to their mission, and says **this** is what an important and significant person looks in the Kingdom of God.¹

¹ Mark 9:33-37

Yikes!

For some of us, it is our professional or family connections that help us feel like Somebody special. Who do you know? Who are your people? Many folks here in Montreat have really impressive family backgrounds and professional connections. Jesus' disciples did really well by this standard because, well, they were friends with Jesus after all! But then the disciples try to pull rank and question the qualifications of some random nobody who was casting out demons in Jesus' name but lacked any personal connection to the Master. The disciples tell Jesus they are going to stop this person, but Jesus affirms the man's ministry and tells them to leave him alone. Jesus refuses to judge this person by his connections (or lack of them)!²

Or how many of us judge a person's worth or respectability by how much money they have! I know here in church we try to value everyone alike, and we really want to welcome the poor. But let's be honest, if a new member class attracts a recent college graduate who is looking for work and a recently retired physician, I think we all know who is going to generate the most excitement and attention. Wealth is a big deal, even in church.

But then Mark tells about a time when Jesus' ministry attracted a dream recruit. This eager young man was devoted to God, he kept all the commandments, Jesus loved him...and on top of all this the guy was rich! Don't you just know all the disciples were high-fiving each other in the background as Jesus and this well-dressed young man were off talking by themselves. But at the end of their conversation Jesus tells him, "There's just one more thing you need to do to be a real disciple—let's clean up this whole wealth thing. Liquidate your assets, give the money to the poor, and then come follow me. Then you'll be good to go." Wealth is not a sign of a person's significance in Jesus' eyes; he treats it as a hindrance!

So now we come to this morning's reading, and Jesus still has the wrecking ball out. You and I are impressed by people who wield power and authority—people who take charge, capable leaders. CEO's command a lot of respect with us. But in our reading this morning, James and John come asking Jesus to put them in positions of authority. "*Grant us to sit one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.*" Now I don't want to be too hard on these ambitious disciples—theirs is a reasonable request. James and John are clearly part of Jesus' inner circle. And they are in a situation where Jesus has gotten fixated on this crazy idea of going to Jerusalem for the Passover, which everyone knows is going to be extremely dangerous. James and John refer to their promotions taking effect when Jesus comes in glory, but if the unthinkable occurred and something bad happened to Jesus, his followers

² Mark 9:38-41

would benefit greatly from having designated vice-chairs who could step in and take charge.

Jesus rejects even this suggestion, saying his followers should be focused on lowly service instead of power and authority: “[W]hoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant.”

C’mon, Jesus, you’re killing me with this stuff! Every single way I have of feeling like Somebody a little bit special you throw under the bus. In place of that you suggest lowly service. Being a servant to everyone makes me tired just thinking about it, Jesus. It feels like chores. It’s like saying “If you want to be my disciple, eat lots and lots of broccoli.” Ugh! This is tough stuff for those of us who’ve managed to accumulate some achievements and status and respectability along the way. Where’s the good news in this?

You know, as I’ve wrestled with this, I’ve become convinced that Jesus’ purpose in all this is not to beat us down, but to point us to a way of being Somebody that is so powerful and so far-reaching that all our usual strategies pale by comparison.

God’s love, you see, burns passionately for every single human creature God has made. Jesus embodies this divine love. And the problem with all our usual strategies for feeling special is that they divide the world up into people who are more significant, and those who are less so. But when you and I start quietly looking down on these lesser people who are unsuccessful, or illiterate, or poorly connected, or impoverished, or struggling...Jesus calls us out and says, in effect, “Why are you looking down on this precious child of God? Can’t you see the infinite love and care that God has for them? I offered up my life for these people, how can you see them as nobody special?” This passionate, all-encompassing love of God blazes at the heart of Jesus’ concern for the lowly and the least and the lost, and it finds embodiment in Jesus’ loving sacrifice for all. “*The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve.*”

God wants to make you Somebody in a way that far surpasses our paltry little do-it-yourself strategies that build ourselves up at our neighbors’ expense. The Holy Spirit wants to draw you into the very life of God, so that this same passionate, all-encompassing love which burns at the center of Jesus’ life will start to fill your heart to overflowing and spill over into the world around you. You are a child of God; you are a light to the world! Just imagine what that can be like--to have your life flooded, overwhelmed, radiant from top to bottom with passionate divine love. Talk about being Somebody!

Now I will say flat out, I can’t manufacture a life like this on my own. None of us can. But undergirding Jesus’ teaching about becoming servants is the Holy Spirit’s work that joins you with Jesus and draws you into the all-encompassing, all-consuming fire of divine love that fills his life, so that this same divine love will start to blaze forth from your life as well.

This isn't some abstract theory. I suspect you may be experiencing at least a little bit of the Spirit's work in you, perhaps without even realizing it. Divine love has a way of taking root and growing in people who seek to follow Jesus. Maybe God will surprise you with a growing ability to reach out in love and acceptance to people who don't look like you, or act like you, or come from a similar background as you, or even smell like you. Have you noticed that happening?

More challenging for me is bringing Christ's all-encompassing love to bear on our political divides. So much in our national life encourages us to hate and ridicule the people who stand across the political aisle from where we are. I may have stirrings of charitable feelings for such people, but then I start to think about just how *wrong* are, and my anger rises, and I'm left wondering how I could ever relate to them in love. But you know, Jesus prayed for the Roman soldiers who were pounding the nails into his hands and feet—it's hard to get more wrong than those soldiers were! But their horrible wrongness was never a reason for Jesus to reject them. And I guess that's good news, because I can remember being wrong myself once or twice, and maybe Jesus still loves me in spite of it. I don't believe Christ's love appearing in the midst of our political divisions will mean we stop caring about our national life, as if our disagreements didn't matter. But I do know that God's love transcends our human rightness and wrongness, so maybe as Jesus works in our hearts more his love can rise above our political hatreds and become the context in which we talk about our disagreements.

You know, sometimes I think this all-embracing love of Jesus really is gaining some traction in my life. On good days I can be kind and generous and open-hearted. But then I get ahold of some disposable income. And as I gleefully ponder how to spend it, I'm aware of one way of dividing people into categories of worthy and unworthy that remains stubbornly rooted in my heart. I'm referring of course to that division which puts ME, MYSELF and I at the top of my personal concern, and everyone else in second place. I may run around with self-congratulatory illusions about how well my life reflects God's love, but then Jesus points out that where your treasure is, there your heart is also.³ And I can't ever remember getting a year-end bonus and excitedly thinking about who I'm going to give it away to. Lord have mercy on me a sinner!

But even here, brothers and sisters, even in this final stronghold where our sinful hearts elevate self over neighbor, God has not given up on us. You and I are works in progress. The God who loves us so passionately wants to fill our hearts and lives with Christ's love. And it will happen if we just muster

³ Matthew 6:21

the courage to ask. “Ask, seek, knock”, says Jesus.⁴ Open yourself to God, pray for the Holy Spirit, and you will find your heart being set ablaze in ways that may surprise you—even when it comes to money!

Sometimes I think we overlook God’s working because it looks too ordinary. But like a tiny acorn that has the potential to grow into a great and mighty oak tree, the seeds of Christ’s love and Christ’s Kingdom are here and beginning to bear fruit in us. Watch the offering baskets going around on any given Sunday; or pay attention to the pledge cards that will be coming in soon. These are real and tangible signs of the Spirit working to pry loose that death-grip which money has on all our hearts so that people can miraculously let go of it—substantial amounts of it in some cases! These are signs that Christ is cracking open that last fortress of our self-absorbed hearts. The Holy Spirit is here turning lives outward, kindling fires of divine love...in us! It’s real and it’s happening and with God’s help those fires of love can burn even brighter and hotter and you can be Somebody in ways you never even dreamed. *“Whoever wishes to be great among you must become your servant”*. God can make your life into a beacon from which Jesus’ own love bursts forth into our darkened world. It is starting right here—the signs are clearly visible if you have eyes to see!

God wants to give you this amazing gift of Christ’s own love; don’t be afraid to ask for it! Let this be the day when you pray for God to set ablaze that shining, loving *Somebody* God created you to be.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁴ Matthew 7:7