

The Upside Down Kingdom

June 22, 2014

Matthew 10:24-29

I once had a church family with a three-year-old son. For family fun, they liked to play the game Memory.

It consisted of a bunch of cards arranged on the floor face down. Those playing took turns, trying to turn over matching pairs of cards.

If you got a match, you kept them and went again. The person with the most matches was the winner.

As the family played, the dad remarked, "My strategy is that I focus on two or three specific pairs that I'm trying to get, and after I get them, I pick out two or three more."

The mother said, "My strategy is that I start on the cards in the corners, and each turn I work my way towards the center, trying to remember all the cards."

Their three-year-old son replied, "My strategy is that when y'all aren't looking I peak under the cards."

How many of you here want to be losers? How many of you like coming in last place? How many of you desire to be the worst at something? Are you kidding?

It's awful! We don't like losing, and we hate coming in last. It's embarrassing. It's humiliating. It makes us feel... freakish... less than human... abnormal... or worst yet – common.

I will have to say, though, that sometimes losing can prepare us for the real world. I might get slammed by some for saying this, but I've never been a fan of this practice that seems to have crept in to youth sports and other activities, where everyone gets a trophy regardless of performance.

Back in the day, when I tried to play sports, the winners got the awards and the losers got, well maybe a handshake and a "good game."

It didn't ruin anybody, and it taught us that you are not always going to come out on top in life and you shouldn't expect to be rewarded for mediocrity.

Still, we want to be winners. We yearn to be first. We desire to be the best at something.

Athletes will train all their lives for a gold medal, work year round for a championship ring, go to great lengths... to be the best. We all want to be winners at whatever it is we do!

The desire to be a winner is not unique to us today. We can see it in the Bible: as in today's Gospel lesson, when James and John sidle up to Jesus and ask him a question. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask."

Now, Jesus must be in a good mood, because he asks them this question in return: "What do you want me to do for you?"

"Oh boy," say James and John to one another, rubbing their hands together in anticipation. "Brother, this is our lucky day! (Now quick, before he changes his mind...) Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."

Those Zebedee boys are aiming high. They're asking to be executive vice-president and chief operating officer of heaven... respectively.

Now, here is where I'm going to steal a page from the playbook of Martin Luther King Jr. because I love what he has to say about Jesus' response.

What was the answer that Jesus gave James and John? It's very interesting. One would have thought that Jesus would have said, "You are out of your place. You are selfish. Why would you even ask such a thing?"

But that isn't what Jesus did. He did something different. He said, "Oh, I see, you want to be first. You want to be great. You want to be important. You want to be significant. Well who doesn't... it's only natural.

"In fact... if you're going to be my disciple, you must be great... you must be important... you must be significant. Wanting to be first is a good instinct, I don't want you to give it up.

"But I want you to be first in love. I want you to be first in moral excellence. I want you to be first in generosity. I want you to be first... in service."

Now I want us to play "Let's Pretend" for a minute. Remember that old radio show? I loved it as a kid – I can still sing the Cream of Wheat song.

Let's apply what I'm going to call the gift of sanctified imagination: imagine that you are there observing someone who is listening to Jesus make his speech to devoted followers and disciples-in-training as recorded in today's passage from Matthew.

And let's pretend that they have all of today's modern electronic conveniences, so this person you're watching is tweeting from his smart phone some parts of the speech to someone else who, though interested in Jesus, is unable to be physically present.

Here are some of the tweets going out:

“Do not fear those who kill the body.”

“Whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father.”

“I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”

“And one’s foes will be of one’s own household members.”

“And whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.”

All the while this listener has been tweeting, he’s been waiting for but not received any response.

Finally, he hears a beep telling him a response has been tweeted to him. It says:

No longer interested.

Can we blame the person who’s been receiving the electronic messages? Put the statements together that he’s read. What comes across is less an invitation to adventure and more a recipe for disaster.

In five sentences, Jesus has made following him not only less attractive but nearly impossible. He’s asking for too much; he’s asking for it all.

How dare Jesus! What right does Jesus have to ask those who would follow him to be willing to risk it all?

A former seminary student, John Reynolds, has written a book entitled *The Fight for Freedom: A Memoir of My Years in the Civil Rights Movement*. He includes an account of his first meeting with Martin Luther King Jr.:

“I do remember shaking Dr. King’s hand,” he writes, “and feeling totally in awe that I was actually meeting him . . . Dr. King asked me two questions. The first was if I believed in, and could accept, the principle of non-violence. I remember saying that I didn’t know anything about non-violence, but I was willing to accept it as a tactic. He said that non-violence was important to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and it must be important to those who worked for SCLC.

“The other question was whether I was willing to die for what I believed in.

How dare Martin Luther King, Jr.! What right did Martin Luther King, Jr. have to ask of one who would follow him to be willing to risk it all?”

Perhaps the two young upstart preachers, divided by a couple of thousand years but bound by Spirit, knew that only such an unfair question could fairly highlight the terrain and the stakes of the gospel calling.

This is no small, meek, and mild call.

- This call has to do with ultimate choices made by the deepest part of ourselves, our souls.
- This call has to do with encountering persons in their deepest valleys.
- This call has to do with presenting our authentic selves to a mysterious God.
- This call has to do with asserting that God's love is as relentless as evil is hurtful.
- This call has to do with believing and inviting others to believe that no matter how deep the hurt, God's love is deeper.

All of this and more compels Jesus, and those who followed in his leadership steps centuries later, to place all of their cards on the table and come clean from the start with their followers, at the risk of losing more than a few temporarily interested prospects.

Jesus is telling us that this work has to do with matters of ultimate meaning, value, and weight. Its matter is all-important.

So, make no mistake about it, unless you are willing to give it your all, do yourself and the world a favor, and step aside, now. All deserves all.

Jesus hopes that his call to adventure and the ultimate importance of it will be compelling enough so as to not scare everyone off, and make the demands worth it.

Now, I personally think this is a brilliant stroke. You see, it makes our desire to be first a GOOD thing. It makes our passion to be the best an asset and not a hindrance.

It takes one of the strongest desires we have, and turns it towards a purpose that can do some amazing things.

That is what it means to follow Christ. That is what it means to be a Christian. If you want to be great... you must be great in all the RIGHT things.

And let there be no mistake about this: it costs something to be a true Christian. To be a (lukewarm) Christian, and go to church, is cheap and easy work. But to hear Christ's voice, follow Christ, believe in Christ, and confess Christ, requires much self-denial.

It will cost us our sin, our self-righteousness, our ease, and our worldliness. ALL must be given up. Jesus would have us thoroughly understand this. He clearly tells us to count the cost.

Jesus knew that the "Cost of Discipleship" would be very great and that we who truly commit to follow Him could well be scared to death at the prospect of facing the many challenges and threats to our way of life and our well-being.

And so Jesus offered these words of comfort and explained to His disciples that they need not fear those who might react violently to the gospel message because even though they might destroy the body they could never destroy the soul.

Listen to these words: “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father’s will. And even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.”

As we journey together in the ministry the Lord has given to us it is a comfort to know that we are very precious to God.

Now in all honesty, unlike the early Christians, it is highly unlikely that you and I will face the prospect of losing our lives as we follow Christ.

But there can be, and often is for the true disciple, emotional trauma, discouragement and even rejection. If we haven’t experienced those things, maybe our discipleship needs some fine tuning.

But no matter what happens in the course of our daily lives, we can be confident that today and tomorrow are in God’s gracious hands.

And we can stand up and be a participant in God’s redeeming activity without worrying about the little things that get in the way of our calling.

Yes, it might seem that Jesus had it upside down – to be first, be last. But understand the meaning – to be last in the ways of the world is to be first in the ways of God and his kingdom.

That is greatness as Jesus defines it for us.

And here is one last thing that is amazing when you look at greatness through Jesus’ eyes. By giving that definition of greatness, it means that everybody can be great, it means that everyone can be a champion, it means that everyone can come in first... because everybody can serve.

It’s like one of my favorite stories from the Olympics. It was the 100 meter dash, and the racers were all poised... muscles ready to spring into action. The gun goes off, and all 10 runners were off... neck and neck.

It was a heated race... lead changes happening too fast to keep track of. Then, something devastating happened... the runner in lane four tripped and fell.

You could almost feel the horror in air... but then... one by one... every single runner stopped running, and went back to pick up their fellow Olympian.

Together, side by side, they ran the final 20 meters to finish line... together. All of them taking first place. It was the Special Olympics, and because they all became servants... they all came in first.

There’s a lesson in there for all of us. It is a message like the one Jesus has for us... wanting to be first is not a bad thing... but be first in the right thing.