

First Presbyterian Church

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“Enough”

Isaiah 53:4-12

Mark 10:35-45

This passage is an overachiever’s nightmare. It starts out easily enough for those of us who are prone to striving and getting ahead. James and John- two of the first disciples to have been called, leaders among the group, sidle up to Jesus to lobby for favor. Sensing an opening through which they might move up in rank, they seize the moment and approach Jesus to ask for the disciples’ version of a promotion. Out of the twelve, they are angling for what they understand to be the top two spots.

Those of us used to a world in which achievement is good and status is better get this kind of thinking and can relate to the sons of Zebedee and their desire to get ahead, to have places of prominence alongside the King of Kings.

But just as we get comfortable with this example of go-getters going and getting, Jesus does what Jesus does and turns everything we thought we knew about success on its head.

“You do not know what you are asking,” he says to them. And it is true. By this time in Mark’s gospel, Jesus has predicted his rejection and suffering three times. And this is the third time the disciples just don’t get it. So it is the third time he lays before them what genuine discipleship is. He tells them that, in order to be great, they must be servants. Not an easy lesson to learn 2,000 years ago. Not an easy lesson to learn today.

There seems to be something about the human psyche that is drawn like a magnet to the more. There is something within most, if not all, of us that never feels quite satisfied, quite complete, quite adequate, and is always on the lookout for something else. It is the empty space inside of us that tells us that no matter what we have, what we do, who we are, it’s never quite enough.

This feeling of insufficiency is an equal opportunist- it hits us at home and at work, in our wallets and our mirrors, with our families and our friends, and with complete strangers. It even strikes at the heart of our faith.

Writing about this passage, John Calvin said that it contains a “bright mirror of human vanity,” reflecting as it does the ambition that is a marker of our humanity, that sadly often overshadows or perverts what God intends to be our true focus.

We try to put a good spin on it when it rears its ugly head, citing the virtues of hard work and the joy of accomplishment, but really we know, deep down in that empty space, that what we are talking about are two different things.

Hard work is a virtue- as American Presbyterians, it is in our spiritual DNA as our Reformed and Puritan forebears sacrificed a great deal to build a new life for themselves and, consequently, many others in this place. There is nothing wrong and a lot right with working hard, having goals and seeking to accomplish them. But like most virtues, it doesn't take a whole lot to turn healthy ambition into a vice, and the vice side of it, whatever you want to call it- overachieving, striving, workaholism- is not a pretty thing.

This vain ambition is present in us all, in one form or another, and it starts at a pretty early age.

Some years ago, when I was serving another church, I heard a story about a Sunday school class taught by a man in the church. It's a lesson he did with elementary school children of all ages. As the children gathered in their Sunday school class, he would enter a few minutes late. Without saying a word, he would walk around the classroom, approaching each child and handing them something. To some children he gave a penny, to others a nickel. Some got a dime and a few got a quarter or even a dollar.

In the younger classes- Kindergarten and first grade, the children were ecstatic- someone had given them something valuable and they loved it. But in the older grades, it was a different story. Those classes quickly devolved into chaos. Before the teacher had gotten all the way around the room, the children who had received smaller coins were mad and those who had received more were laughing and taunting their classmates.

The teacher, once he had distributed all the money, would sit down and observe the class for a minute, still not saying a word. After a bit, he would identify the child who seemed the angriest, and ask him, “why are you unhappy?” Inevitably the child would reply, “because Sarah got a dollar!” The teacher would say, “no, forget about Sarah, I'm talking about you- why are you unhappy?” To which the child would reply, “because Sarah got a dollar!” And so it went.

Eventually, the teacher would say, “5 minutes ago, you were happy. You came into Sunday School with nothing in your hand. Now you have a nickel, but you’re not happy.”

“Because Sarah got a dollar!”

As soon as the children were old enough to know about the value of different coins, they knew that they wanted the ones with a higher value, and if someone had more than they did, then they were upset. It wasn’t fair, they argued.

The teacher would listen to their complaints while continuing to challenge them, asking why it had to be fair, and why they were upset by something someone else had. Usually by the end of the class, he had them seeing, grudgingly of course, that they were basing their happiness not on where they were and what they had, but on where others were, what others had. Their focus was misplaced.

That story comes back to me from time to time, usually when I find myself unhappy because of what someone else has that I want. When I feel that gnawing anxiety that what I have isn’t enough, because it isn’t as much as what someone else has, I think about that Sunday school lesson. I ask myself, was I happy with what I had before I knew what they had? And usually, the answer is yes.

As soon as they heard what James and John asked Jesus, the other 10 disciples got mad. James and John had broken rank and asked for something they all wanted, and now no one was happy. One moment, they were walking together on the road to Jerusalem, and the next they were divided amongst themselves over who had what.

No one was happy because no one thought they had enough.

Someone reportedly once asked John D. Rockefeller, the richest man in the world, what he considered to be enough. “Just a little bit more,” was his reply.

Is it any wonder, really, that Mark tells us that three times, in three consecutive chapters, Jesus delivers his status-quo challenging discipleship lesson? In Mark 8, he says that anyone who wants to be his follower must deny himself, take up his cross and follow; and that those who want to save their lives will lose them. In Mark 9, he says, “whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” And here in Mark 10, we read, “whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.”

Three times in rapid succession, each after predicting his coming passion, Jesus tries to tell the disciples that their human ambition, their self-interest, their desire to get ahead is not all it’s cracked up to be. Three times, in three different ways, he tells them that

they need to move themselves from the center of their own universe, deny their own ambitions and desires and serve others. And three times, they don't seem to get it.

I wonder how many times we have to hear it before we start to get it.

We live in a society in which the ones who are considered great are usually not the ones known for humbling themselves and serving others. In most cases, the ones who get the acclaim and praise, the ones society lifts up as successful and worthy of admiration are the ones who have put themselves first, and done whatever they needed to get ahead. As a culture, we typically laud success and accomplishment, and look questioningly at self-sacrifice and denial.

Of course, this is not always the case, and we do hear stories about remarkable folks who give unselfishly of themselves – police and firefighters, soldiers, missionaries, healthcare professionals, educators, volunteers- but sadly these “human interest” stories are the exception rather than the rule in our daily news, relegated to the back pages or the end of the broadcast.

Ours is a culture of achievement, of celebrity and acquisition and status. It tells us that enough is never enough, and more is always better. And so we, like James and John, are constantly on the lookout for our chance to get ahead. And, like them, we miss the point.

Though James and John sought to sit at Jesus' right hand and left hand when he came into his glory, the truth we know is that, at the end of his life on earth, Jesus had at his right and his left not loyal subjects but hardened criminals. And his resting place was not a throne, but a cross.

And he was the greatest person who ever walked this earth.

The late Letty Russell, a theology professor at Yale Divinity School, called Jesus “the representation of a new humanity – the beginning of a new type of human being whose life is lived for others.” According to Russell, “Jesus helps us to see the Humanity of God so that we too can become representatives of the new humanity.”¹

This, then, is the proper object of our striving. Not fame or fortune, success in the classroom or on the athletic field, not a name up in lights or popularity in the neighborhood, but a life fully lived to the glory of God.

Because, in the end, there is nothing that is enough *enough* to earn us a place alongside Jesus in God's glory. Regardless of our striving and our doing, our wanting and our achieving, nothing we ever do will be enough to make us anything other than who we are

¹ Letty Russell, *The Impossible Possibility*. A sermon preached at Duke Chapel, March 31, 1974.

in God's eyes, and that is flawed, fallen, sinful, yet precious and beloved children. Children for whom Jesus Christ gave his life.

And that ought to change our lives. You see, when we give space to that little voice inside that says that there's not enough- that we're not enough- and we try to calm it by doing more, making more, taking more, being more, we focus only on ourselves and so start to believe that our ambitions alone have the power to save us. And when we do that, we're just wrong.

Nothing we do, nothing we say, nothing we have, nothing we are, can save us.

We are not saved by who we are or what we do, but by who God is and what Jesus did. When we start to believe that, when we begin to accept that our worth is tied to God alone, then we begin truly to live as God calls us to live. Letting go of our human concepts of success, living for others, and giving of ourselves so that others might have enough, is kingdom work. It is, in the end, the greatest goal to which we can strive.

Thanks be to God.