

A husband and wife are on the 9th green when suddenly she collapses from a heart attack. "Help me dear," she groans to her husband. The husband calls 911 on his cell phone, talks for a few minutes, picks up his putter, and lines up his putt. His wife raises her head off the green and stares at him. "I'm dying here and you're putting!" "Don't worry dear," says the husband calmly, "they found a doctor on the second hole and he's coming to help you." "Well, how long will it take for him to get here?" she asks feebly. "No time at all," says her husband. "Everybody's already agreed to let him play through."

OK, some background on the gospel. Today's gospel begins immediately after Jesus told the disciples for the third time that He was going to suffer and die and that all of this was happening under the plan of God. This was Jesus' most detailed passion prediction, which makes the disciples' incomprehension all the more incredible. And Jesus asks James and John the exact same question that he will ask the blind Bartimaeus in next week's gospel: 'What do you want?' For several chapters now Mark's Jesus has been talking about His path to the cross, a path of suffering, service and sacrifice. But all the disciples can talk about is position and power and greatness. So Jesus points them to children (the gospel we heard 2 weeks ago), whose innocence and smallness are pictures for the disciples to emulate. Or the story we hear next weekend – where Jesus meets the blind beggar Bartimaeus. When asked the same question as James and John: 'What do you want?', Bartimaeus simply asked to receive his sight, so that he might follow Jesus on the way. The children and Bartimaeus provide the frame, the corrective lenses, to see the path of discipleship as Jesus intended it. (GRACEWORKS, 21 October 2018, p. 20) In the end, our ambition to achieve status or our choice to serve will be the truest reflection of our discipleship of Christ. We could spend some time in prayer this week asking ourselves – honestly – am I here for a life of service – or to achieve status?

And finally, scholars point out that we have often misread the last part of this passage – that Jesus will give His life as a RANSOM for the many." While the word used is LYTRON, which SOMETIMES indicates ransom – it usually refers to God's deliverance of Israel – LIBERATION, not payment. What we should take away from this is that somehow Jesus' death will liberate us from our desire for power and help us to become a new community of God's kingdom. The issue is not so much about our freedom from sin (unless the sin is our vanity and power-seeking) as it is about the peculiar qualities of those who would be part of God's reign. Mark's Gospel is concerned with human sin but more concerned with Jesus as the great apocalyptic inaugurator of God's reign. Which is fancy theological language for our Savior – the One who gives us – and our world – the possibility of a new beginning. And we note that Jesus says here that 'many,' rather than a small chosen few, will benefit from the work He is doing. (adapted from Willimon, Oct-Dec 2018, p. 10)

So how does this apply to us? And I have some good news and some bad news. The good news is that I only have one more point! The bad news is that this homily will be just about as long as usual. But there is still MORE good news -- your usual nap time will not be robbed! Sweet dreams! We live in a society that tends to divide us up into winners and losers. Sadly, we don't often reflect on how this affects our relationships with each other, nor on what it means for us as followers of Christ.

This means that in essence, our relationships with one another tend to be too charged with competition and jealousy because we are too infected with the drive to out-do, out-achieve, and out-hustle each other. For example, here are some of the slogans that pass for wisdom today: *Win! Be the best at something! Show others you are more talented than they are! Show that you are more sophisticated than others! Be number 1! Don't be a loser!*

These phrases aren't just innocent axioms cheering us to work harder; they are viruses infecting us so that most everything in our world now conspires with the narcissism within us to push us to achieve, to set ourselves apart from others, to stand out, to be at the top of the class, to be the best athlete, the best dressed, the best looking, the most musically talented, the most popular, the most experienced, the most traveled, the one who knows most about history or golf or movies or sex, or whatever. These are all just other expressions of "Let me sit at your right hand or your left in your kingdom. Put me ahead of the others." At all costs we drive ourselves to find ourselves something at which we can beat others. That idea is almost genetically engrained in us by our culture.

And because of that we tend to misjudge others and misjudge our own meaning and purpose. We structure everything too much around achieving and standing out. When we achieve, when we win, when we are better than others at something, our lives seem fuller; our self-image inflates and we feel confident and worthwhile. Conversely, when we cannot stand out, when we're just another face in the crowd, we struggle to maintain a healthy self-image – we can easily become depressed.

Either way, we are forever struggling with jealousy and dissatisfaction because we cannot help constantly seeing our own lack of talent, beauty, and achievement in relationship to others' successes. And so we both envy and hate those who are talented, beautiful, powerful, rich, and famous, holding them up for adulation even as we secretly hope for their downfall, like the crowd that praises Jesus on Palm Sunday and then screams for His crucifixion on Good Friday.

This leaves us in an unhappy and agitated state: How do we form community with others when our very talents and achievements are cause for jealousy and resentment, when they're sources of envy and weapons of competition? How do we love each other when our competitive spirits make us see each other as rivals rather than brothers and sisters in Christ?

Community can only happen when we can let the talents and achievements of others enhance our own lives and we can let our own talents and achievements enhance, rather than threaten, others. But we're not very good at this. We're too infected with competitiveness and ambition. It's difficult for us to rejoice at the success of others. Now don't get me wrong. I'm not suggesting that we should not strive to live lives of excellence. It's the ATTITUDE that is behind what we are doing. And how it is affecting us.

Like our culture, we tend to divide people into winners and losers, admiring and hating the winners, looking down on the losers, constantly sizing each other up, rating each other's bodies, hair, intelligence, clothing, talents and achievements. But, as we do this, we vacillate between feeling depressed and belittled when others outscore us on our little rating scales – and pompous when we rate ourselves as superior to them.

But this is not the gospel of Christ. This is not the path we are asked to follow. But being a servant is becoming ever more difficult as we become more and more obsessed with our need to stand out, be special, sit above, to make a mark for ourselves. We live in a chronic state of jealousy where the talents of others are perennially perceived as a threat to us.

Christ invites us not to compare ourselves with others, to not make efforts to stand out, and to not let ourselves be threatened by and jealous of other's gifts. Our faith invites us to join a circle of life with those who believe that there is no need to prove that we are special – because we are already -- as children of God. Which then allows us to believe that other people's gifts are not a threat, but rather something which enriches all lives, our own included

When we divide people into winners and losers then our talents and gifts become sources of envy and weapons of competition and superiority. This is true not just for individuals but for nations as well.

By our world's standards, Jesus was a loser. People were shaking their heads at His death, and there was no championship ring on His finger. He didn't look good in the world's eyes. A loser! But, in His underachieving we all achieved salvation. It's the lesson of today's gospel: For the Son of Man has come not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom – LIBERATION --for the many." (last part adapted from Rolheiser, posting of 10/7/2018)

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