



"I Am Second"
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Mark 9: 30-37
September 23, 2018
9:15 AM Service

The Pragmatics of Living Together Within the Community of Christ's followers for the sake of the Jesus Mission

We're working with the earliest written gospel in the Bible: the Gospel of Mark. Today we encounter one of the many paradoxes of Christian faith. There are a lot of these mind-bending, soul-searching revelations in Scripture:

- The God who needs nothing but asks for everything (Abraham)
- The God who inhabits the universe but is as close as our next breath (Moses)
- The God who is faithful to the unfaithful (Hosea)
- The God who is actively inactive (Job)
- The God who is consistently unpredictable (Habakkuk)
- The God who wins through losing (The Cross)
- The God who is divinely human or humanly divine (Jesus)

(for more about the paradoxes of Christian faith, see Krish Kandiah, *Paradoxology: Why Christianity Was Never Meant to Be Simple*. InterVarsity Press, 2017)

These are all theological mind-benders, but there are some of the paradoxes which are not so theological or even theoretical. They are the pragmatic ways of living together within the community of Christ's followers for the sake of the Jesus Mission.

We encounter one today in Mark 9.

³³ After they arrived at Capernaum and settled in a house, Jesus asked his disciples, "What were you discussing out on the road?" ³⁴ But they didn't answer, because they had been arguing about which of them was the greatest. ³⁵ He sat down, called the twelve disciples over to him, and said, "Whoever wants to be first must take last place and be the servant of everyone else."

³⁶ Then he put a little child among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ "Anyone who welcomes a little child like this on my behalf^[a] welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes not only me but also my Father who sent me." Mark 9:33-37 NLT

This is one of those paradoxical head-scratchers: what does it mean?



Being the sort of muddling along Methodists, we don't want to push to the head of the line to be first...but we certainly don't want to be the caboose, either, do we? We prefer something in the middle.

Middle of the road Mainline Protestants
Middle Class
Mid-America

So, we want to be average.

Well, actually, we want to be a bit above average is preferred, right?

That's the rub with Jesus. Human beings – wherever and whenever and whomever – always conclude we're just a cut above most everyone else.

The research of social psychology is abundantly clear on this dynamic of human nature.

Most people think they're better than the average person: that they're smarter, more likeable, more attractive.

Maybe you don't think this is you. Maybe most people think they're better than average, but you're not as big-headed as most people. Maybe you're more modest than the average person.

This tendency to think of ourselves as "above average" is a well-established bias.

In a study conducted by psychologists Hoorens and Buunk, high school students were asked to estimate how true a number of personality traits were of themselves, and of the average student. Results showed that students rated themselves significantly higher than average on positive traits (such as honesty, persistence and originality) and lower than average on negative ones (such as hostility, vanity and reasonableness.) There are a ton more studies which

demonstrate this tendency to rate oneself as above average: ninety percent of drivers think they are better than the average driver, and most students think they are more intelligent than the average student. I wouldn't be surprised if you reckon you're less susceptible to the standard cognitive biases than most.

It's commonly referred to under several names: illusory superiority, the *better-than-average effect*, or, my personal favorite, the Lake Wobegon effect – after Garrison Keillor's fictional town where "all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average."

(Adapted from Jess Whittlestone, "Do You Think You're Better Than Average?" found at <https://80000hours.org/2012/11/do-you-think-you-re-better-than-average/>)

Of course, the prevalence of the *better-than-average-effect* is something we don't talk about and keep it to ourselves. But it helps declutter some of the ways in which we interact with one another. It also provides some insight into a quarrel the disciples of Jesus were having among themselves.

An Awkward Silence

Jesus has just indicated again where this path of being "The Christ" was going to lead him and them:

³⁰ Leaving that region, they traveled through Galilee. Jesus didn't want anyone to know he was there, ³¹ for he wanted to spend more time with his disciples and teach them. He said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of his enemies. He will be killed, but three days later he will rise from the dead." ³² They didn't understand what he was saying, however, and they were afraid to ask him what he meant.

It seems to me in reading the gospels that there must have been a number of times Jesus felt like he was talking to himself – even in a group of people. The disciples here seem not just clueless as to what is going on and what is developing right before their eyes; they seem quite self-absorbed in jockeying for position, finding their place, and proving again that they are "better than average" at following Jesus.

This is ironic since, the Scripture tells us, that Jesus wanted some privacy with his close-in disciples so he can teach them about the suffering and death on the horizon. Success of the whole mission of redemption hinges on training these few who will carry the gospel to the world. The ministry of Jesus makes a notable shift from the ovation of the crowds to the teaching of the Twelve...who, in this case, aren't listening. Jesus had just said that he would be betrayed by someone and given over to his enemies. You might think the disciples would want to figure out who the traitor would be and which enemies he was talking about.

But no, they were again quarrelling among themselves. Sometimes disciples of Jesus developed a bad habit of quarreling among themselves. The Original Twelve had argued among themselves over who forgot the loaves (Mark 8:16). They had argued with the teachers of the law when they failed to cast out a demonic spirit (Mark 9:14). They will argue with the successful exorcists who do not follow the proper procedures (Mark 9:38). They will snort at a woman who displays extravagant devotion to Jesus

and denounce it as a waste of money (Mark 14:4-5). Even at what we call the Last Supper this competitive spirit taints as Peter boasts the he will outdo all the other disciples in remaining faithful to Jesus (Mark 14:29) – shortly before he turns tail and runs away.

In the present passage the disciples are jockeying for position to be honored alongside their powerful liberator Messiah. It is a tragic-comic picture – Jesus walks ahead in silence on his way to his sacrificial death while his straggling disciples push and shove, trying to establish the order of the procession behind him.

(Adapted from David Garland, *NIV Application Commentary: Mark*. Zondervan, 1996, p. 367)

When they arrived in Capernaum, though, Jesus exposed the spat by asking them what they were talking about earlier. Crickets. Awkward silence.

Remember that earlier Jesus had laid down the non-negotiables when it comes to following him:

1. Set Your Way Aside (Humility)
2. Share the Cross (Bear the Suffering of the Broken World)
3. Follow Jesus (Don't Just Admire Jesus; Obey Him)

Now we come to one of the ways in which all three are put into practice: submitting ourselves to the mission which means serving those around us. The Original Twelve suffer from a persistent self-image of "better-than-average" that somehow exempts them from the uniform requirement for all followers of Jesus: servanthood.

To make the point with a practical illustration, Jesus takes an infant in his arms. Your Bible probably translates this as "young child". The word, *paidion*, though it can refer to a toddler also refers to newborns and infants. Since the Scripture specifically says Jesus took the child in his arms, I think it is clear we are talking about a very young child who is not yet able to walk. "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me..." (Mark 9:37). This is not because the synagogue in Capernaum needed volunteers to work in the nursery. That might certainly be included, but it is much broader and deeper.

To get the point here we need to set aside our culturally conventional notions of children as future presidents, Nobel Prize Winners, and Olympic Champions. In the time of Jesus children were *not* regarded as especially obedient, trusting, simple, innocent, pure, un-self-conscious, and humble. The point of comparison is *the insignificance of the child on the honor and status scale*. The child had no power, no status, and few rights. A child was dependent, vulnerable, entirely subject to the authority of others.

I might amplify the comparison by also reminding us that a young child can be cranky, demanding, smelly, nearly impossible to understand, and cause many sleepless nights – and, importantly, cannot survive without the direct, hands-on, time-consuming, attention and help of others.

Jesus chose the child, who may have needed a diaper change at the moment (who knows?), to represent those who are needy and lowly. If you want to be great in God's way of seeing things, we should give attention to those who are regarded as insignificant and overlooked.

The Gospel of Mark pictures a community of Christ-followers where no one is to be treated as either too high or too low. Realizing that we all begin as repentant sinners in need of God's redeeming love levels the ground before the cross of Jesus.

We tend to look at things such as heritage, race, education, rank, wealth, social position, language, possessions, and employment. God looks for self-giving service.

Most of Us Want to Serve the Jesus Mission, But Many of Us Want to Serve in An Advisory Capacity

So, how can we begin to release ourselves and one another from the burden of the Lake Wobegon Effect? How can we silence the whisper of the Tempter who assures us that we really ARE better than everybody else?

Let me suggest three practical ways that can break through our personal delusions and set us free from the burden of "better than":

1. Rinse your mind and heart with Scripture.

Of course, the teaching of Jesus on this is the center point, but the Scriptures have numerous reminders of the foundational practices of serving others, valuing others, helping others. The conflicts we observe within the earliest communities of believers, conflicts and controversies often addressed in the letters of the New Testament, are filled with reminders to regard one another as part of the same community with various gifts, abilities, talents, passions, and possibilities. It is also clear as we read the gospels that the Original Twelve were on a growing curve themselves, so we can be patient with others and with ourselves as we experiment, learn, and grow in our serving with and for others.

2. Come Alongside Some of the Nearby Examples

First Church is greatly blessed by many who have already been released from the "better than" syndrome inherent in being human. When you see them serving, ask if you can help. Take the time and effort, set aside other things, re-organize priorities to make room to serve.

3. Do some personal exploring.

Our spiritual growth understandings here are organized around a four-stage model.

Explorer: I'm checking out faith and church for the first time or the first time in a long time. Maybe I'm considering an adult version of a childhood faith, or re-considering my beliefs in the aftermath of particular life experiences.

Believer: I recognize that I don't have all my questions answered but I believe in Jesus and have deliberately chosen to be a partner with others in the Jesus Mission.

Follower: I am intentionally engaging myself in Christ-centered spiritual practices and serving others as a way of expressing my faith in Jesus.

Leader: I am in relationships that influence and guide others in their journey of following Jesus.

This means, of course, that there is room for all of us...and that it's kind of messy since we are at various places in our personal spiritual journey. It also means that we have resources among us to help one another along the path. For example, the First Things First groups provide an overview of ways we can engage God's promptings in making next steps of connection with First Church. Or the "Where Do I Fit in the Jesus Mission?" workshop is offered 3 or 4 times each year to help us understand our spiritual gifts, our personal preferences and passions, our affinities with others, and the availability we may have to serve in specific and practical ways – whether serving the church community or the community beyond the church.

The point here is that we don't have to jockey to find our place in the Jesus procession. The title for us all is the same: "Servant of God for the Sake of the World."

We Start Our Pursuit of "Better Than" Early; But It's Not Too Late to Overcome It

The city of Lakeville, Minnesota (population about 60,000 in 2015) holds an annual celebration called Pan-O-Prog that features the Miss Lakeville Annual Scholarship Pageant, Beer, Brats & Bingo, a Carnival, and the always exciting and often controversial Baby Crawl-A-Thon.

Emotions ran high when the 2015 winner, ten-month-old Berkley Bailey, was disqualified. Berkley crossed the finish line as the clear winner, but moments later event organizers huddled and then stripped her of the first and only title of her young life. Judges ruled that the tot actually pulled herself forward with her left side and then lifted her right arm in the air.

Pan-O-Prog President Diana Neameyer explained to the *Sun This Week* newspaper that the rules were established to make the competition fair and give everyone a level playing field. Berkley's mom, Samantha Moore, protested that the rule is unfair to babies who have a unique way of getting around. "That's the only way we've ever seen our baby crawl," she said. "That's all she's ever done. The doctor told us it was a crawl."

Ms. Neameyer said the issue first arose at the race in 2014 when a baby crawled like a bear, on his hands and feet. He finished the race first, but was also disqualified, because as Neameyer explained, "When you do it that way, you are a speedster."

In 2016 the *Sun This Week* reported, "There were some close calls, but no disagreements over the declared winner of the July 5, 2016 Pan-O-Prog Baby Crawl-A-Thon: 11-month-old Reagan Ortega of Lakeville." Wow, one year without conflict!

We start pretty early to be "winners".

Jesus' call is to be servants. What a blessed relief!

