

Sermon – 5th Lent
Mark 10:35-45
March 18, 2018

“Worst to First”

Last October the Houston Astros baseball team made merry near the pitcher’s mound of Dodger Stadium, piling on one another and hugging everything in sight after winning the World Series in the 7th and deciding game. A good chunk of America was heartened to see the Astros win as barely two months earlier the city of Houston was all but rained off the face of the earth by Hurricane Harvey. What’s more, the Astros had in three consecutive seasons from 2011-2013 lost an astounding 66% of their games. That’s pretty bad. They had been baseball’s worst - but last October they tromped all over the turf at Dodger Stadium as baseball’s best.

Though not particularly an Astros fan, I was happy for them too. Their victory reminded this Minnesotan of a Sunday evening in October 1991, as Minnesota Twins left fielder Dan Gladden crossed home plate (actually he jumped in the air and stomped on it), Minnesota’s fans were in a frenzy and baseball announcer Jack Buck, gravelly voice and all was shouting into his microphone “*the Twins have won it!*” It was one of the greatest World Series ever played (a very satisfying one too) – five of the seven games that year were decided on the winning team’s last at bat. But what made that World Series unique was that it was the original “*worst to first*” series. Both the Minnesota Twins and their opponent the Atlanta Braves had finished dead last in their divisions the season before.

Only a baseball fan could use an obscure fact like that as segue to the Bible – but here I go. I have a hunch Jesus would have applauded last year’s World Series result and for that matter the entire ‘91’ series. In Mark the 10th chapter there is an episode in which Jesus’ followers try to shoo little kids away who came to be blessed by him. Jesus is unimpressed – “*to such little ones belong the kingdom of God*” he told them. Conversely a man of some means comes and genuinely wants to become a follower, but at the suggestion he put his possessions away first he went away sad. All this leads to our lesson today, where two of Jesus’ closet followers – the brothers James and John ask him to make the implied obvious – “*make us your right and left hand men.*” Clearly they were thinking good things were on the horizon for Jesus – Jesus is of course thinking a cross.

Regarding the “*Kingdom of God*” he’d referred to, Jesus says the only way to the top is through the bottom. In my most recent call I served “First” Lutheran church. They and a gazillion other churches in our country, if Mark 10 is our guide, might be better off ditching “First”, and calling themselves “Last.” (I say that only because calling themselves “*Worst*” might be hard to explain to visitors - though I bet it would get you a ton of internet hits).

And why not - there is a congregation I read about recently in Dayton, Ohio that call themselves “*Omega Baptist Church.*” What is “Omega?”...some star in outer space...some new energy drink? No, “Omega” is the *last* letter of the Greek alphabet. They are reminding themselves how a congregation *might* become great in the eyes of God. So they may as well call themselves “*Last Baptist.*”

Being last, at the bottom of the heap, so far out of the competition that the competition doesn't even know or care that you are there is *so* NOT the place any of us want to be. We want to be “*Katlyn Jenner*”, the latest...whatever she is...when a more biblical image might come from a TV series from a few years ago called “*Ugly Betty*”, featuring a girl who struggles through life in more ways than just personal appearance.

James and John, the “Sons of Zebedee,” didn't want to be “last”. “*Teacher we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you*”. They wanted head table status and the honor they think should come from following Jesus. Hard as it may be to accept – it certainly was for James and John - Christians get to head tables not by sitting at them but by waiting on them. Celebrity of the sort that James and John sought and which our culture practically deifies has as its goal being seen - walking in the limelight. Servant hood of the sort Jesus showed sees and follows the true light.

One summer our family visited a “Hard Rock Café”. If you've ever been to one then you know they combine great food and awesome Rock music videos. That's how our visit started, but it ended with my picking up this little card near the entrance as I paid the bill. On a glossy piece of paper was the Hard Rock Café motto...mission statement perhaps - “*Love All/Serve All.*” This is just a restaurant chain folks, but they get it. And they probably never read Mark 10:45.

Christian, the news flash from today's Good news is that you weren't nominated to be “*the first*” – you're challenged for the sake of Jesus to be “*the last.*” Last for example, to forget about the grieving friend, last to leave the bedside of the dying, last to grow exasperated at the children who come to us as “*spiritual drop-off kids*”, last to leave homeless or domestic crisis shelters unfunded, last to shrug our shoulders at world hunger, and yes, last to surrender the faith and wisdom of the church that has gone before us in favor of the trendy beliefs of the present. All the while resisting every temptation to shrug and say our present culture has gone to “you know where” and therefore can't hear the message of Christ humbly re-presented.

Author and Methodist Pastor Leonard Sweet said; “*What if we were to implement an Omega way of life — where holding last place, last ditch, last stand options isn't a last gasp effort, but is evidence of the first breaths of the Spirit of Christ reborn in us*”? Our lesson suggests Jesus Christ is calling his church to some “*last place*” thinking...where the least, last and lost have hope precisely because the church and we who love it is a church that sees and hears the one who became last and servant of all. And what could be worse...I mean better...than to be a part of a church like that? AMEN

