

September 23, 2018

TEXT: Mark 9:30–37

TITLE: Arguments & Answers: Being Great

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Why are there almost always arguments on road trips? Is it because everyone's uncomfortable, there's not enough leg-room, it's boring sitting for hours driving interstate highways? Is it because you're hungry but there's not another exit for 25 miles—Is it because you were hungry but the junk food you've been eating doesn't agree with your system—Is it because the person driving is driving too slow, driving too fast, taking the wrong route when you told them they shouldn't go this way, but no, would they listen to you? Arguments happen on road trips because, by definition, we are traveling and thus we are not at home—not at home literally, not at home figuratively.

To travel means risking giving up control. You're heading to a new place, where maybe others are in charge, where you will be dependent on the kindness of strangers. Now, I'm still in the introduction of this sermon, but I'm going to get real here real quick, so don't let your mind wander thinking I'm still in the fluffy, feel-good part of the homily. If you travel to a place where a language other than English is spoken, you won't have the power of verbal persuasion at your disposal to get what you want—and that can be uncomfortable. If you travel to a place where whiteness and being Caucasian isn't the dominant reality, you may suddenly realize how much white privilege is an accepted perk of modern American life—and if your race no longer allows you to easily move to the head of every line, you may feel uncomfortable. Travel can be like watching a football game when you're cheering for the visiting team while surrounded by rabid fans of the home team. Travel can mean you're now in a different place, possibly with different people. It can mean being a 60 year old in a crowd of 20 year olds or vice versa; it can involve being heterosexual in a gathering of folks with non-binary, trans, or same gender attraction identities. It's not automatically a bad place, but it's not "home." It's different.

Now here's the pivot to Jesus: If your faith is dependent on never leaving "home," on never traveling outside your safe, familiar group, then it's not a faith based in the gospels. Jesus was always on the road. Jesus was always moving people from one place to a new place. Sometimes he told folks to turn around, repent, and walk in a new direction. Sometimes he told them to make room at the table for folks on the margins, or better yet, walk to the margins and see if they'll accept an honest apology and make room for you. I don't believe Jesus ever said, "You're just fine where you are. No need to change. No need to travel anywhere."

The nature of gospel road trips means we are moving from where we are to where Christ wants us to be—and being creatures of habit, creatures of pride, creatures of sin, we are bound to argue along the way. In Mark 9, the disciples and Jesus were passing along the west side of the Sea of Galilee, heading toward the city of Capernaum and eventually down to Jerusalem. It was on this journey that an argument broke out about who among their little group was the greatest. These are silly arguments but very

human arguments. You don't argue over who's the greatest unless you think you're a candidate for a position of honor. If your focus is on privilege and protecting what you think is your right, then you're going to get into one of these arguments about who's the greatest.

Why did this issue come up? Most likely it came up because Jesus told them how he was going to be betrayed and killed in the coming days. Their leader, their rabbi, was going to die. That was hard to accept. But right on the heels of that news came another troubling thought: If our Master is gone, what will happen to us? It appears each disciple asked himself a couple questions "If Jesus dies, what will happen to me? Who will be in charge?" Those were not noble questions. They were fearful and self-centered questions. And they were not faithful questions either. Which is likely why no one wanted to say them out loud when Jesus stopped the road trip, turned to face them and asked "What were you arguing about just now?" Their silence told Jesus all he needed to know.

To break the silence, Jesus said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last and servant of all." Frankly it feels like the point of this bible story has been preached on so many times that we really don't hear it—but let's try to listen to Jesus' words with fresh ears. At the Last Supper Jesus took off his outer robe, tied a large towel around his waist, knelt and washed his disciples feet—gently handling them, cleaning them, and drying them with a cloth literally attached to his body. He showed them how the servant of all is first of all. Jesus touched lepers; he ran his fingers over the blind man's eyes; he talked to the mentally ill and troubled man ranting among the cemetery tombs in Gerasene; he lifted up the weeping woman with a jar of perfume, who'd been pushed to the margins in a male-dominated world long before #metoo and called her a child of God. Jesus modeled how greatness is not being first, but rather being an agent of grace farther down the pecking order of life. In that way, journeying in that direction is where greatness can be found and how Jesus is to be followed.

Several weeks ago, one of our state representatives, Ed Gainey, called the church and asked if we might be able to host his annual Senior Fair. Usually it was held in the Coliseum in Homewood, but that venue wasn't available. In typical ELPC fashion, we said "Sure, I guess," not really knowing what we were getting ourselves into but trusting that saying "yes" was how we can show the love of Christ through hospitality and welcome. We knew there would need to be tables for vendors—social service groups handing out flyers, Duquesne pharmacy students giving flu shots. Our kitchen would be used for a sit down luncheon for the seniors—a lot of seniors—actually about 400 seniors. Pam Kimmel and Paul Martin and our entire staff did a great job, getting every available table down to the Social Hall—setting up chairs—trying to figure out how to squeeze so many people into that part of our building. When the time came for the event—well, actually since this was a meal for Senior Citizens, about an hour and an half before the event was supposed to start, people start arriving. They were dropped off all around our church—some walking confidently and strong, others using canes, walkers and motorized wheelchairs. It was a geriatric flashmob. And everyone needed directions on how to get to our Social Hall. Volunteers and church staff were busy

talking with folks, offering assistance, pointing the way, escorting people through the building. Rep. Gainey was there—the mayor came by—but all the focus was on those scores of older men and women, as we tried to be the church of Christ that day for them in lots of little, humble, servant ways.

We only discovered what it meant to be servants that day because we said “yes” to someone else’s event—because we agreed to go on a road trip with someone else steering the church car for that day. Was it profound? Maybe not—but it was memorable and I think it was successful in a servant sort of way. I hope it was a good day for our guests, so that they might know they are loved and special instead of all the other voices they might hear in this world defining them by their age, capability, race, gender, or bank accounts.

On that day on the road to Capernaum, Jesus didn’t lecture his disciples or scold them because they were fixated on who is the greatest among them. He brought a child forward. Scripture says he took it in his arms—so that means he picked up the little boy or girl, a toddler easily overlooked and certainly never part of the equation when asking about worldly greatness. Jesus said, “Whoever sees this one—really sees the child—and welcomes, cares, worries about, acts to protect, and loves this one, well, it is like you’re welcoming me.”

To live out your faith, you have to leave home—you have to be willing to travel beyond where you’re always safe, always privileged, always in control. Jesus was always moving people from one place to a new place. Sometimes our focus is on moving from this old world to a new world yet-to-be, the eschatological consummation, the realm of God dimly glimpsed now yet which will be fully realized in God’s heavenly time. But more often than not, the new place to which we need to journey is actually quite close at hand. It is as simple as taking a step toward someone on the margins, someone walking kinda slow, someone with a question on their lips, someone with a tear in their eye, someone like a child seeking to be seen and be welcomed.

Jesus’ answered the argument about greatness with one line: “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Then he picked up a child. End of discussion.