

James 3:13-18 The Message (MSG)

Live Well, Live Wisely

¹³⁻¹⁶ Do you want to be counted wise, to build a reputation for wisdom? Here's what you do: Live well, live wisely, live humbly. It's the way you live, not the way you talk, that counts. Mean-spirited ambition isn't wisdom. Boasting that you are wise isn't wisdom. Twisting the truth to make yourselves sound wise isn't wisdom. It's the furthest thing from wisdom—it's animal cunning, devilish conniving. Whenever you're trying to look better than others or get the better of others, things fall apart and everyone ends up at the others' throats.

¹⁷⁻¹⁸ Real wisdom, God's wisdom, begins with a holy life and is characterized by getting along with others. It is gentle and reasonable, overflowing with mercy and blessings, not hot one day and cold the next, not two-faced. You can develop a healthy, robust community that lives right with God and enjoy its results *only* if you do the hard work of getting along with each other, treating each other with dignity and honor.

Mark 9:30-37 The Message (MSG)

³⁰⁻³² Leaving there, they went through Galilee. He didn't want anyone to know their whereabouts, for he wanted to teach his disciples. He told them, "The Son of Man is about to be betrayed to some people who want nothing to do with God. They will murder him. Three days after his murder, he will rise, alive." They didn't know what he was talking about, but were afraid to ask him about it.

So You Want First Place?

³³ They came to Capernaum. When he was safe at home, he asked them, "What were you discussing on the road?"

³⁴ The silence was deafening—they had been arguing with one another over who among them was greatest.

³⁵ He sat down and summoned the Twelve. "So you want first place? Then take the last place. Be the servant of all."

³⁶⁻³⁷ He put a child in the middle of the room. Then, cradling the little one in his arms, he said, "Whoever embraces one of these children as I do embraces me, and far more than me—God who sent me."

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James 3:13-18; Mark 9:30-37 (The Message)

“Be the Best – A Sixth Grade Flashback”

Starting with a flashback from 6th grade – this is the poem I remember learning from Outdoor School:

If you can't be the pine on the top of the hill, be a shrub in the valley, but be the best little shrub on the side of the hill. Be a bush if you can't be a tree.

If you can't be a bush, be a bit of the grass and some highway happier make.

If you can't be a musky, then just be a bass, but the liveliest bass in the lake.

We can't all be captains, some have to be crew. There's something for all of us here.

There's work to be done, and we've all got to do our part in a way that's sincere.

If you can't be a highway, then just be a trail. If you can't be a sun, be a star.

It isn't by size that you win or you fail, be the best at whatever you are.

--Douglas Malloch's poem, as I remembered it

When this week's text got me thinking about that poem, I was stunned that I remembered the whole thing, or at least my version of it. What made that verse stick in my 6th grade brain?

And worse yet, what made it hang on there for over 30 years? Well, it could be about what I was thinking during the rehearsals at the time. In our class, various students were assigned just one line to remember, and the more some kid struggled to learn his or her part, the more frustrated I became, until by the end of the practices, apparently, that ridiculous poem became etched on my brain forever. It was also probably the timing of the thing. I was eleven years old and starting to worry a great deal about what other people thought of me. The poem simply was a confirmation of all, and I mean ALL my worst fears at the time. My teachers expected me to be “the best.” My parents encouraged me to always do my “best.” But among my friends, there was a whole lot of comparing going on. Was I the tree or the bush? Captain or crew? The highway or the trail? We all understood, implicitly, if not explicitly, that even if you were the very, very, very best bush of all, that the tree was somehow better than you, no matter what the end line schmaltziness of the poem happens to try and convey.

I lived by the perfectionism of that poem for quite some time, always comparing myself to other people. You know all the clichés, “If you’re not the lead dog, the view never changes.” “Second place is just the first loser.” I came to believe that being the best mattered more than just about everything else. Even friends became looked on as rivals. I pouted to myself when someone else got a better grade, or a teacher’s compliment. It’s not a fun thing to remember. For the most part, those feelings brewed on the inside, and hopefully didn’t escape too often to outside behavior that would hurt other people.

I learned pretty quickly there was something shiny, and valuable, and somehow fully American about that drive for success. And yet, it seems like I also might have been right at home with the twelve disciples arguing on the way back to Capernaum about who got to be the greatest among them. Apparently, this is not a uniquely modern problem. I can easily relate to

what they were each thinking. In a relatively small class of students, filled with a tax collector, fishermen and those loud and obnoxious sons of Zebedee, surely each would have had their own reasons to believe that they were Jesus' favorite, and somehow better than the rest.

But the disciples don't get any prizes for being the best here. They get scolded. There won't be a teacher's pet in this class. Jesus lets them know that their argument has been a waste of time. So you want to be the greatest, do you? Well... the greatest will be last of all, servant of all. The greatest among you won't be any more important than a little child. In fact, anyone who embraces a child like this one right here, embraces me, and the God who sent me. The first will be last, and the last will be first.

But Jesus, we argue, that's not how we do things around here. At least that's not how I initially learned them. "Be the best" is quite a different stance from "Be last of all, and servant of all." Culturally, we are a nation filled with aspiring achievers and performers, and the generations that follow me are suffering from that trap significantly. An article that I read based on the research of criminologist Adam Lankford at the University of Alabama, proposes that the gap between what's expected of young people, and what they are actually be able to achieve may be a significant piece to understanding the gun violence escalating across our country. So is the intense desire for fame. If you get all these cultural messages that you have to achieve something in your life, and be better than everyone else, and then get famous for it, and yet you find yourself trapped in a dead end situation with nowhere else to go, the grandiosity and publicity of killing people may just be enough to tip a fragile person to do the unthinkable. How accurate is the research on that correlation? I'm not so sure, but the argument made sense to me. If we can't be "the best," at something then what is there to be? (Melissa Healy, *Los Angeles Times*, "American Exceptionalism: US is No. 1 in Mass Shootings – By a Very Wide Margin")

Jesus offers us an alternative if we so choose to take it. Jesus teaches us the way of suffering. Jesus leads us to let go of our striving and join him on the path of descent where we no longer obsess about being the best, but go to the last of the line and serve those who are the least of these. It is the scenario in which the exalted will be humbled, and the humble will be exalted. Jesus was not a “be the best” kind of preacher or poet, but he is portrayed that way in much of cultural Christianity, which is why the Pope’s messages sound so weird sometimes. You can tell that Pope Francis loves Jesus first, and tries to authentically preach Jesus, the Jesus of the least, last, and lost. It sounds vaguely familiar, but we have to learn how to hear that message over the din of Christianity that has gotten mixed up with an exceptionalism that claims that Christians are not only the best, they are also the pine on the top of the hill that stands taller than anybody else.

The passage we read this morning from James also reminds us that the wise live humbly. Mean-spirited ambition isn’t wisdom. Boasting that you are wise isn’t wisdom. Twisting the truth to make yourselves sound wise isn’t wisdom. You can’t fake it on this path. You can’t fake wisdom, and you certainly can’t fake humility. Real wisdom comes from living a holy life and getting along with others. It can be hard, as James admits, to treat others with dignity and respect. It’s especially hard if we are constantly finding ourselves in comparison mode.

This is where all the “isms” come into play on the next level. If men are better than women, or being white is better than being black – you can be the best woman or the best black person, and still not measure up to the ideal. So is that really what the poem is saying? Probably not. I may be reading WAY too much into it. And I certainly don’t think it was the intent of the author Douglas Malloch who wrote it early in the 20th century. In fact, when I was trying to see how I did in remembering the words, I found out that Martin Luther King, Jr had used this poem

in a message to students at Barratt Junior High School in Philadelphia not long before his assassination. He said to them in his typical passionate preacher tone, I'm sure, "If it falls your lot to be a street sweeper, sweep streets like Michelangelo painted pictures, sweep streets like Beethoven composed music, sweep streets like Leontyne Price sings before the Metropolitan Opera. Sweep streets like Shakespeare wrote poetry. Sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will have to pause and say: Here lived a great street sweeper who swept his job well." (<http://old.seattletimes.com/special/mlk/king/blueprint.html>) This was King's idea of being the best. Truly be the best at whatever you are.

No matter what, I will still struggle like those disciples with my sense of ambition, drive, and the determination to be good at what I do. That's probably not ever going to completely go away. I understand that. However, being aware of that ambition and drive, and what it can lead to, is important. Being my own personal best is different from comparing myself to others in a "better than" imperialistic kind of way. We have to fight against the sense that being Christian, or American, or solidly middle class entitles us to be the tree that looks down at the bush or the grass with disdain. As a small church, we have to remember that the mark of a good church is not determined by the numbers of people who come on Sunday morning, but by those who live differently and touch other lives deeply for having been there. (Clergy Coaching Network) So rather than dole out trophies to the greatest disciples or give ribbons to the best churches, Jesus instead lifts up those who find themselves on the undersides of all these faulty equations. He puts a child in our midst and reminds us that it's about embracing the small, the unimportant, the least valued in order to help us understand that we are all, ALL valuable in God's eyes. It's not how big or majestic we are that matters; it's how we love others and find our love in God.