

Having an Omega Mentality

Mark 10:35-45

Have you ever driven through a town or city, and noticed the signs announcing the names of local churches? There's "First Presbyterian", "First United Methodist," "First Baptist," and "First United Church of Christ."

That's easy. Most towns have a First Presbyterian, or First United Methodist. After the designation of "First" has been snatched up churches in the same denomination start to shop around for another name.

"Second" isn't very popular, because as hard as they try, they'll never be "First". Better to be "Third" or "Fourth" and not care at all. Within our own denomination, there's even "Twelfth Presbyterian Church", but I suspect, in their minds, that congregation thinks of themselves as being "First."

And if they can't be first, many churches abandon being numbered altogether.

The Omega Baptist Church, named after the last letter in the Greek alphabet, doesn't claim to be "first", and by its very name is putting itself at the end of the line. They are declaring to the world that they are the "Last Baptist Church."

Being last, being on the bottom of the heap, being so far out of the competition that the competition doesn't even know it exists. Being the Omega anything is so NOT the place any of us want to be.

It goes against the American dream of "pulling yourself up by your bootstraps," of homegrown grit, of possessing that "go-get-'em" spirit. These are the slogans that define our lives and our society.

And the reward of hard work is getting ahead, climbing the corporate ladder to the top, being first in all you do. Second place is second rate. We all want to "go for the gold," win the trophy, marry the Quarterback, wear the green jacket at the Masters or the yellow shirt at the Tour de France.

James and John, the "Sons of Zebedee," certainly did. In today's text they try to shake Jesus down. "Teacher we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." They wanted to ensure for themselves the best seats in the house at the messianic banquet in the glorified future. They wanted to sit at the head of the table, on the right and left hand of Jesus himself. They wanted the honor that they think should come from following Jesus.

But Jesus turns their hoped-for hierarchy on its head. It's the world, the Gentile "tyrants," Jesus insists, that believe in a "top-down" power structure. Jesus said, "for you, it must be different." Discipleship isn't about finding a special place of honor. Discipleship is about embracing the identity of a servant and offering service "to all."

If the **truth be told, we are all, in some way, sons (or daughters) of Zebedee**. Certainly we know better than to make outlandish requests as this narcissistic duo does. But we want the best seat in the house. We may not be upfront about our self-centered yearnings, but many of us spend our lives scheming for those kinds of privileged positions.

We covet the best of the lot, the top spot, the place of recognition. It's part of our human condition. We have Zebedee DNA in our blood. However, it's only in

facing our own tendencies to be a son or daughter of Zebedee that we can come to terms with our humanity and live the new life of discipleship.

Henri Nouwen wrote, "Only those who face their wounded condition can be available for healing and so enter a new way of living." When we're honest with ourselves about our condition, we begin a journey toward wholeness.

I remember enjoying a few days in Boston while Sue attended a conference. Each day, before meeting our friends for the afternoon and evening, I'd walk a few miles into the city and enjoy the sights: Faneuil Hall and the surrounding Quincy Market, Boston Common.

One morning a caffeine quest led me to a local coffee shop. I pulled on the door. It was locked. I pulled harder. Still locked. Then I saw a hand-written sign on the other door: "Gone for the morning. Be back at 9:30."

Still not believing my eyes, I walked to the storefront window and peeked in. Sure enough, the lights were on, but no one was inside. Then I noticed another handmade notice: "Store for sale. Great business location and opportunity."

A coffee shop closed during coffee hour. A proprietor who was more concerned about taking care of his own needs than serving people walking the streets looking for a "cup of Joe". A restaurant that didn't know what business it was in. No wonder he was going out of business.

Now let's apply that to the church. Did you know that 75% of the churches in America are going out of business — either declining or dying. "Out to Lunch" so to speak. So busy feeding their own faces, taking care of their own needs, that they ignore the hungry and thirsty around them.

It's so contrary to what Jesus challenges his disciples to embrace - a "theology of lastness" so as to be transformed, which only occurs through servanthood.

When the man with many possessions asks about eternal life, Jesus invites him, "Follow me." **Following Jesus in a life of servanthood transforms us.**

When John appeals to Jesus to stop the man from casting out demons, Jesus responds, "Don't stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me." Following Jesus, even in unorthodox ways, can lead to wholeness. Servanthood is a means of grace.

In light of this, the words of St. Francis of Assisi take on even more meaning:

"O Divine Master, grant that I may not seek so much
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love,
for it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life."

The church, the Body of Christ on earth, isn't called to be "first." We're challenged to be "the last."

- We should be the last to leave the side of a sick bed.
- We should be the last to let a grieving spouse sit alone.
- We should be the last to write off the children whose parents have failed them or thrown them away.
- We should be the last to ignore the homeless camped out along our streets.

- We should be the last to allow hunger to gnaw at the bellies of our neighbors.
- We should be the last to shrug our shoulders at ongoing environment degradation.
- We should be the last to let despair grind down the powerless.
- We should be the last to condone cruelty of any kind, to any living thing.
- We should be the last to let human hatred triumph over divine love.

What would happen if we began to have an Omega mentality? — where holding last place, last ditch, last stand options wasn't a last gasp, but the first new deep breaths of the Spirit of Christ reborn in our midst? How far would that take us?

Jesus told his disciples that they must be a “slave to all.” Whatever heap we stand before — we are to burrow to the bottom of it. As his disciples we're to reach new lows. As his disciples we're to see that climbing to the top is a human achievement, but sinking to the bottom of the barrel takes on the divine presence.

To be a “slave to all” requires the incarnation of Christ in our lives, every day, in everything we do, knowing that we “can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13)

The secret to being first is being last. And the secret to being last is found in the word “all.” For mortals it is impossible, but for disciples: “all things are possible” (Mark 10:27).

For mortals, all things are “mine”, but for disciples, “all things are yours” (1 Corinthians 3:21). God wants to do in your life “above all that we ask or think” (Ephesians 3:20).

God will supply “all your need” (Philippians 4:19).

You want it all? Then realize that the only way you're gonna get it all is to be willing to sacrifice all, counting “all things but loss” (Philippians 3:8). That's the only way we can become “slaves to all.”

As Elvis Presley's song “Big Hunk of Love” put it, “I ain't greedy, Baby, all I want is all you got!” All God wants is all you got. Nothing more, nothing less.

God, and God's creation, is to be loved “with all”

- with all your heart,
- with all your soul,
- with all your strength,
- and with all your mind.”

Being first by being last. Having an Omega mentality in all that we do. That's how we find a seat of honor in Heaven.