

The Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost
Mark 9:30-37

Servant Leadership*

The Rev'd Dr. Patrick S. Cheng
The Church of the Transfiguration
September 23, 2018

I have a confession to make. I love watching reality TV. I especially like competition-type reality shows like Top Chef, Project Runway, and even the Bachelorette. Chances are, on a Friday night you'll find Michael and me eating take-out and watching a pre-taped episode of one of these shows – and waiting with great anticipation to see who will receive a rose and who will be eliminated that week.

I suspect that I'm not the only one in our parish who enjoys watching these shows. There's something incredibly satisfying about seeing a bunch of contestants compete week after week until the best chef, the best fashion designer, or the best fiancé emerges. But don't worry – those of you who also like watching reality TV shows don't have to fess up about this.

Interestingly, it seems to me that Christianity is often seen as a reality TV competition in the public imagination. That is, Christians are often viewed as contestants in a race to win the ultimate prize of eternal life. Some get the coveted final rose. And others – those who are eliminated – are left to burn in Hell's Kitchen.

I guess you could think of it as Top Saint. Or Project Heaven. Or the Angelette. Except that, instead of being judged by Tom Colicchio, Padma Lakshmi, or Heidi Klum, we will be judged by God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost.

In today's gospel reading from Mark, Jesus decisively rejects a reality-show version of Christianity. Greatness in the Kingdom of God is not defined by winning first place or by ruthlessly eliminating others from a competition. Greatness, according to Jesus, is the exact opposite of that. It is welcoming – or receiving – the very least among us. It is embracing those, who like children, have little or no status in the world.

Our gospel passage begins with Jesus and his disciples traveling to Capernaum. Jesus is teaching them about his forthcoming passion, death, and resurrection. This is the second time that he is revealing these things to them. However, the disciples still don't understand what Jesus is saying. In fact, they are afraid to ask him for clarification.

During their journey, the disciples are out of earshot from Jesus, and they spend their time arguing about who is the greatest among themselves. When they arrive at their destination, Jesus asks them what they were arguing about. Somewhat ashamed, the disciples again remain silent.

* Copyright © 2018 by Patrick S. Cheng. All rights reserved.

But Jesus knows what they were talking about. He takes this opportunity to teach them about how the Kingdom of God works. He says to them: “Whoever wants to be the first must be last of all and servant of all.” Jesus takes a little child into his arms and says, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

Now it’s important to remember that, in Jesus’ time, children had a much lower social status than they do today. They weren’t seen as individuals who were valued in their own right. They certainly weren’t loved and cared for as they are today. Rather, children were seen as generally insignificant and a drain on a family’s economic resources. Because of this, Jesus’ example of a child as someone to be served would have shocked the disciples.

By using a child as an example of who must be served first in the Kingdom of God, Jesus is telling us that we – as followers of Jesus movement – must first serve all those in society who are helpless and without power. That is, we must not only interact with those who are important and who can give us status or other things of value. Rather, we must embrace, first and foremost, all those who are the least among us.

In recent months, we’ve heard many stories in the news about the least among us, including children, who have suffered great harm at the hands of others. I think of the immigrant children who have been separated from their parents at the border. Over 400 of them remained separated from their families as of the beginning of this month. I also think of the children who have suffered abuse in the Roman Catholic Church and in other church communities. Many of these individuals have remained silent for decades, and have only recently come forward to seek justice and reparations.

If you haven’t heard, two weeks ago Bishop Dietsche issued a letter to the people of the Diocese of New York about the diocese’s #MeToo task force. This task force consists of eleven people, including a bishop, priests, and a layperson, who have experienced sexual harassment and abuse in the church and in the world. The task force is currently gathering anonymous stories of sexual harassment and abuse that happened to people in the Diocese of New York. Some of these stories will be read aloud at a liturgy of lamentation and repentance at our diocesan convention this November.

The diocesan #MeToo task force has also established a helpline and email address through which confidential pastoral care can be obtained. You can find this information on the diocesan website, or you can speak with me after mass. As Bishop Dietsche writes:

[An] invitation is extended to anyone in the diocese who lives with the same pain of sexual abuse or harassment to make it known. . . . The season of listening has come. The time when long suppressed voices may speak and be heard has come. And I am grateful to those people, mostly women, but men too – who have broken the silence in our culture. And I am grateful to those who have created the processes here described for bringing into our diocese and our convention the safe place of telling.

By breaking the silence and telling the stories of such individuals, the diocese is committed to welcoming – and receiving – the least among us.

The vision of servant leadership that we hear in today's gospel passage couldn't be more different than the Darwinian competition that characterizes reality TV. Instead of starting with the desire to lead, servant leaders start with the desire to serve others. Only afterwards do they aspire to lead. As we heard in the Letter of James, good leaders put their envy and selfish ambition aside and are "willing to yield" to others.

All joking aside, Christianity is far more than just a reality TV show. The salvation and redemption that we receive from Christ Jesus is due entirely to God's grace – no matter how "great" or "not great" we might be. There are no winners and losers in the Kingdom of God. In fact, those who are the least among us are often the ones who are most able to recognize the gift of God's grace. That's because the ones who think they are "great" are often too busy congratulating themselves instead of giving thanks to God.

I probably won't give up my reality TV watching habits on Friday night. And neither should you. After all, it's OK to indulge in some guilty pleasures from time to time. But this week's gospel reading has caused me to think a bit more about those who are eliminated. And how they are probably the first ones to receive a rose in the Kingdom of God.