

Sermon- 9/16/2018- Text Mark 8:27-38

Peter Principle Reversed

Grace and peace to you and from our Lord Jesus Christ. I titled this homily exercise as Peter Principle Reversed. Many of you will remember the concept of the Peter Principle. A generation ago a guy by the name of Laurence Peter wrote a book, The Peter Principle. It is a concept which observes that people in a hierarchy tend to rise to their level of incompetence. In other words, employees are promoted based on their success in previous jobs until they reach a level at which they are no longer competent, as skills in one job do not necessarily translate to another.

We have seen this principle in action. Someone might be a great teacher, but when they reach their aspiration of being a principal, they're horrible. Someone might be a really good assistant coach, but when they are promoted to head coach, they are terrible. A person might be an amazing assistant Pastor, but when they become a senior Pastor the church goes down the tubes. We have seen it.

But in our lesson this morning Jesus reverses the Peter Principle. Instead of having the disciples rise to fame he has them move down the status flagpole. What's it all about, Alfie? Let's look at the Sitz in Leben. Let's look at the text.

The Gospel I just read is from the 8th chapter of the gospel of Mark. For you biblical scholars this was the first gospel written. (Even though it comes second). This chapter occurs right smack in the middle of the ministry of Jesus. Eight chapters down - eight chapters to go. In some ways it is a turning point. Jesus had, up to this point, performed miracles, healed people, fed the multitudes, confronted religious and prejudice bigots and preached God's word. A lot of stuff.

Now it is time to take stock. A time to do a gallop poll. For us in the months to come, we will have more than our fair share of polls. So Jesus asks "who do people say I am"? So the disciples do their version of the 1st century gallop poll.

Well... among college educated women 59% say you are Elijah.
among college educated men 70% say you are John the Baptist.
among non college educated men 65% say you are Abraham

among Hispanic and black women 76% have no opinion.
28% haven't a clue.

Then Jesus asks Peter, "Who do you say I am?" And it was Peter who astounded the others when he said, "You are the Christ, the Messiah come from God". The Messiah - the one who the Jews were anticipating for centuries. This is the first time that anyone said that Jesus was the long awaited Messiah. Atta boy, Peter. Jesus is so pleased that he decides to tell the disciples about God's plan for the world. To paraphrase, Jesus tells them that soon he will go to Jerusalem, and he will be ridiculed and lose a popularity contest and ultimately killed. Then Peter, who a few seconds before had tweeted out some amazing insight, says No Way! That can't happen to you, No Way!

After Jesus says to Peter that sometimes he just doesn't get it, he reminds the disciples what their purpose is. Actually, he says follow me, but first, deny yourselves. A concept of a servant leader.

I was writing these few thoughts on September 1st. I always like to write my homilies way ahead of time. One never knows when emergencies come in a parish. It was the day of the funeral for Senator John McCain. I smiled to myself. Senator McCain got it. This idea of a servant leader.

What Jesus was talking about was to get ones' hands dirty, to forget about success and comfort and to work with the needs of people. We all had a glimpse of that last Sunday in our God's Work, Our Hands Sunday. Perhaps someday it could be more than one Sunday.

A story. A Pastor in a large congregation received a phone call from one of his parishioners. Not just any parishioner, but an important one. In large congregations, that means someone who gives a lot of cash. The man said that his daughter, Jenny, had just decided to drop out of Michigan Law School. She had announced this when she was home this past weekend, actually, after attending church. This important parishioner wanted the Pastor to call Jenny and talk some sense into her. So the Pastor did. He called Jenny and reminded her how hard she had worked to get into Law School and that she just couldn't throw it all away.

“What inspired this decision anyway”, he asked. Jenny said it was his sermon. The sermon about being a servant leader. She talked about how she felt that she was only in law school to meet her own selfish needs, and that his sermon shook something loose in her. She remembered how she felt when she was teaching the migrant children in the church program last summer. She felt fulfilled. And now she wanted to spend her life being a servant leader. “Now look, Jenny”, the Pastor said, “It was just a sermon”.

Just a sermon, like the kind that Jesus gave all the time. We all know Servant Leaders. Like Senator McCain, or Albert Schweitzer, or Millard Fuller of Habitat for Humanity, or Mother Theresa. They all had a few things in common. Their faith in Jesus Christ, and the feeling that their lives would be dedicated to service, not wealth or fame. They are followers, with dirty hands and tired feet and joyful hearts, because they took Jesus at his word.

But one thing here we should say. Jenny got it wrong. We don't have to live a life of poverty to follow Christ. We don't have to move to a third world country to be servant leaders. We can do it now, right where we are. In a world that says it's all about us, we say no, it's all about others. In a nation that says what matters most is your wealth, we and Jesus says, no, it's what we do with our cash. In a nation that seems so polarized and people use nasty words, we say no. We follow Jesus with kindness and acceptance of all God's children. That's what it means to be a servant leaders. Here now, whatever your job or role in society is.

It's the Peter Principle reversed. We can be effective and rise to a new level of not incompetence but the bottom rung of expertise. Why? Because we serve others. Is it just a sermon? Or maybe something much more important. Maybe it's what Jesus wants us to do?

Amen- Let it be so.

