

“The Joy of Becoming Insignificant”

I enjoy watching football in person or on TV. However, there is one aspect of the modern game that I do not enjoy; the grandstanding and celebrations. Every tackle someone has to celebrate, as if it were a unique achievement. Every catch is celebrated like the winning touchdown in the Super Bowl. Every first down earned has to be signaled by the player as if he were the referee. I suppose that for some this is part of the entertainment value of the game. As for me, I long for the earlier days where the players let their play do the talking instead of all of the self-aggrandizement.

It seems we are programmed to want to be important. Many of us, if not all of us, crave our fifteen minutes (or is it now seconds) of fame. This craving leads some to work hard to accomplish something. They may study and practice a musical instrument, perfect athletic skills, labor over manuscripts of novels and poems, earn academic credentials, work eighty hour weeks to climb the corporate ladder, spend hours and fortunes to become political leaders, and more. Others expose their personal lives on shows like Dr. Phil, in tell all memoirs, or in committing crimes for the notoriety. We do these things admirable or not all for fulfill the need of our ego. That capital “I” that wants to feel important, memorable, powerful, and significant.

In today’s Gospel reading from Mark two of Jesus’ closest companions on the way, James and John, ask a favor of Jesus. They say, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.”¹ I suppose they think they are asking to become something like the Vice President, or Secretary of State, or head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Jesus tells them that they do not know what they are asking for. They do not realize that Jesus is not going to be glorified as a new political king over Israel. He is not going to conquer the Roman Empire and kick it out in order to reestablish the Throne of David. Jesus knows that to be on his left and his right in glory is to be crucified with him. What they are actually asking for is position of great significance but a cruel, painful, and humiliating death.

It is not only James and John who do not understand. The rest of the disciples don’t understand either. Indeed, they get angry with James and John for trying to get the special places to which they all aspire. Jesus responds to their desire for importance and significance with several important lessons about the Kingdom of God. First he points out how the Roman Empire functions, when he says, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.”² He is not saying that all non-Jews are glory seekers. Rather he is showing that Empire breeds this kind of abusive power.

He continues by telling them, “But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.”³ I can imagine that the disciples looked at each other and said something along the lines of “well that stinks.” Jesus’ idea of servant leadership was not what they had in mind, and not what their egos wanted.

¹ Mark 10:37 NRSV

² Mark 10:42b NRSV

³ Mark 10:43-44 NRSV

For about thirteen years I volunteered with Martha's Table in Washington, DC. I led teams of volunteers who served food to the homeless. After five or six years of doing this work I was getting frustrated with the lack of respect and gratitude we received from those we served. I thought or my ego wanted to be honored because I cared enough to help. Then I read a book by Henri Nouwen called "In the Name of Jesus." In the book, which is comprised of several talks originally given to Catholic clergy, he describes our desire for what he calls significance. As he saw it, despite being called to a servant role, even clergy often strive to be significant. We want our preaching to be lauded, our ability to raise money or build congregations recognized, and our special way of caring for parishioners to be praised. That is, clergy are no different from the disciples or any other human beings in our desire to be important and have our gifts be appreciated.

Nouwen points out that as a celebrated academic and author he had fallen into that trap too. It was not until he started living in a community of mentally and physically challenged people that he realized the importance of **insignificance**. The people in the community were not aware of or awed by Henri's many achievements. What they wanted from Henri was companionship and love. When his ego got out of the way he was able to live into this new challenge and calling, but he had to do so recognizing that there would be no accolades for having done so. This community challenged him to be a human being instead of an achiever.

As I digested Nouwen's book I realized that my frustration with my volunteer work at Martha's Table was an ego problem. When I let go of my needs I could focus on the needs of those I was serving. For example, despite the rules about one meat and one peanut butter sandwich per person, I decided to give them a choice. The choice allowed our clients to feel they had agency and humanity. It also meant that no longer were unwanted peanut butter sandwiches getting thrown to the birds. The only people who got them were those who wanted them. If someone arrived when the meat sandwiches had run out, they might be disappointed but they were glad to get peanut butter rather than nothing at all.

There are other examples of how Nouwen's book affected me. It is the idea of insignificance that has run through my life since. It is hard to get it right some of the time much less all of the time. It is the idea of getting out of our own way and allowing God to serve others through us, did that is crucial. The ego won't like it but the heart comes to understand the freedom it gives us to act knowing that success or failure is not reliant on us. We are freed up to listen for God's call, do as God asks, and let the glory go to God.

When we find the power of being insignificant, we are not tethered to our ego and the appreciation of others for our self-esteem and satisfaction with life. We find not a world of drudgery and powerlessness, but a life rich in the joy of God. The weight of life lifts from our shoulders as we find ourselves yoked to the one whose load is easy and burden is light—Jesus Christ our Lord.