

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, Gospel Year B

Rank No More

Mark 9:30-37

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Analysis by Timothy Hoyer

30They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; 31for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." 32But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

33Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" 34But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. 35He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." 36Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 37"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."



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“As Jesus welcomes us who are ranked as low as little children, we are welcomed by God who sent him. God welcomes us because of Jesus. That is the new way.”

DIAGNOSIS: Who is the Greatest?

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Rank Them from First to Last

Grounding: When Jesus told his disciples that he would be betrayed, killed, and then rise again, he was saying that he was going to be “last of all and servant of all.” But to be last

means the law has judged us to be last while it demands we be first. To be servant of all means the law has judged us to be worth less than everyone else while it demands we earn our worth so God can approve of us. It makes no sense.

Tracking: A symptom of our need to know what is good and what is evil is that we rank everyone and everything. We are ranked at work. Sports teams are ranked from first place to last place. Movies are ranked by how much money they make on a weekend. And we all want to sit higher at the table, that is, closer to the host and so closer than others. The higher we rank, the more we feel the law judges us to be good, even good to God, which is the whole point.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Ranking Is What We Do

Grounding: The disciples could not understand how anyone would want to be last. They could not understand that Jesus was creating a new way to be good to God. It was unheard of. It was outside the way of the law, and they only knew the way of the law, and so could trust only the way of the law.

Tracking: We trust only the way of ranking. We cannot even think that something besides ranking can even exist. We put all our heart into the way of ranking. So we also argue about who is the greatest, we create lists of the top ten (name your activity), and behind it all is our desperate desire to be known as great.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Death Ranks Us

Grounding: Someone sent Jesus, and that someone sent Jesus to be the last, and to be the one to be raised from the dead. That someone is the Creator, our God, and we are in a relationship with God in which we are ranked. A relationship of being ranked exists when there is no love. And the way of being ranked has no

mercy. If a team is in last place, that is what they have earned. It can't be changed based on someone's whim or desire. And in life, every rank has earned death.

Tracking: We hate losing. We hate being ranked. For we know its shame, its despair, its hopelessness. We know deep down that in life everyone eventually loses the game of life. We call it death. Death is rank (stinks).



Photo by Nataliya Vaitkevich from Pexels

PROGNOSIS: Jesus Is the Last

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): And The Last Shall Be First

Grounding: "He will rise again." Yes, Jesus will come in last. He will be ranked as last. He will die. The law will do what it always does. But then Jesus will start something new. He is not starting again. He is creating a new way, a way different than ranking. He is the new way, and just as he rises into a new way of life and living and relating to God, he promises he will give us the same thing.

Crossing: Jesus has risen again for you. Jesus has risen so we are with him. His status is our status. His new way is our new way.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Mercy Is What Jesus Does

Grounding: Jesus promises us that as we trust him (e.g., welcome a low-ranking child in his name) we are welcomed by God.

Crossing: As we hear Jesus' promise, we are given trust in him. As Jesus welcomes us who are ranked as low as little children, we are welcomed by God who sent him. God welcomes us because of Jesus. That is the new way.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): There Is No Ranking, Only Love

Grounding: The way of living according to the way of ranking is being replaced by Jesus' way of forgiveness—welcoming the lowest-ranked, that is the child, the one without worth, the one who can do nothing to gain a higher rank.

Crossing: We no longer trust ranking. We no longer want to rank others. We are free in Jesus to welcome anyone. We are free to bestow love on anyone for no apparent reason at all. We are free to forgive those who do wrong. We are free to tell a friend to "sit higher." We are free to throw a party for people whose birthday is seven months away. We are free to invite the lame and the sick to dinner. We are free to tell others that they are the best. We are free to tell the hopeless that there is hope in Jesus. We are free to tell the condemned they are forgiven. We are free to go to those who are cast out, who are in last place and treat them as winners. We don't believe in ranking anymore. We believe in Jesus.