

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit

Peter, Andrew, James, and John were fishermen by trade.
They were gruff guys—hardened by the world, calloused by life.
Their livelihood depended on what they brought in with their own hands.
They knew how to get what they needed to get by.

Matthew was a tax-collector.
No one likes tax-collectors.
His skin was thick.
He got used to insults and attacks; he could stand on his own.
He didn't take anything from anyone, except money from his neighbors.

The disciples weren't push-overs.
And they weren't dummies, either.
They were strong men, hurt and marked by the pains of this world.
They were just like any of us—knowing what it takes to get through life, wanting to get ahead.

The world hasn't changed all that much since these disciples first started catching fish.
Today things are just as competitive.
If you've got any ambition to succeed in this life, you've got to work, do what it takes.
You need some thick skin, hard hands.
You've gotta look out for yourself.

Today's world is all about getting ahead; it's an incessant drive for upward mobility.¹
To climb the ladder of success.
To reach the top.
To win, to grow, to succeed.

We hear a lot about numbers, about quantifiable growth, about the metrics of success.
The goal is always up, up, up,
bigger, better, stronger, best.
We're always looking for the spectacular, the powerful, what's relevant; how to get ahead.
And it wasn't any different for the disciples.

Each disciple wants to be first.
Technically second, but with Jesus gone—first.
And whenever you've got more than one person wanting to be first, you've got an argument.

My girls always want to be first in the car: Argument.
Seminary students always want the first crack at the book sale: Argument.
Any political race is between two or more people wanting to be first in charge: Argument.

¹ Henri Nouwen, *The Selfless Way of Christ*, 23.

Every attempt to be first is another sacrifice offered to the god of upward mobility.
 Before this idol we're powerless.
 We fall before it every time, every temptation, every chance we get we'll always take the way up.
 We want the best toys, houses, jobs, and compliments.

And every time we get one of these—
 every compliment, every raise, every new thing we've been wanting—
 we're sadly unsatisfied.

The more praise we receive, the more we desire it.
 It's like a bottomless pit, it can never be filled, you can never get enough, you always want more.

Power lusts for more power.
 Greatness always thirsts for something greater.
 And to be first is always on the horizon.

That's your sin.
 You long after bigger and better, more powerful and prestigious, more praise, more glory.

Your sin is that you want to be first,
 and won't be happy until you are.

This desire to be first and best gives birth to jealousy: they've got what you want.
 Jealousy gives birth to lust; and lust to coveting;
 coveting to stealing; and stealing to murder.
 Before you know it, you've broken all 10 commandments, just wanting to be first.

That's the disciples' argument along the way: who's the toughest, who's the best, who's first.

Then Jesus sat down, called the 12 to Himself and placed a child in the midst of them.
 Rather than coming with force, a louder voice, stronger muscle, Jesus flips everything on its head.
 Everything they've thought and argued about and worked so hard for—it's all upside down.

Jesus won't have things in the way of power, first, best, or greatest.
 For Jesus, it's all about love for others, being lowest, last, weakest, and servant of all.
 "If anyone wants to be first, he will be last of all and servant of all." (9:35)

Now this statement isn't simply some formula for getting back to the top.
 He really means it: the last and servant of all will be the first.

As you look at your own life, considering all your seeking and striving at being first,
 your movement along the way of upward mobility,
 you should realize you haven't come close to this rule; *and you won't*.
 That's how the law works. It isn't nice.
 It doesn't make you feel good about yourself.
 And you certainly can't do it or keep it.

The law kills.

It shows you how poor a servant you really are,
how often your desire for being first has pushed others aside;
how your ideas of success and strength and power have gone against the way of Christ.

So Jesus set a child before them.

And with this child, He shows them the way of faith, the way of the cross, the way of weakness.
Jesus' whole life is one of downward mobility.

“He moved from power to powerlessness,
from greatness to smallness,
from success to failure,
from strength to weakness,
from glory to [shame].

The whole life of Jesus of Nazareth was a life in which all upward mobility was resisted.”²

Jesus is first because He truly was last and servant of all.

This way of downward mobility is nothing other than the way of the cross.

It's self-emptying for the sake of another.

It's self-sacrifice, self-giving, self-denying—all for someone else, anyone else, *everyone else*.

Remember how the disciples' argument began?

It began because Jesus was just telling them about His own last-ness:

His service, His laying His life down as a servant for all.

“For He was teaching His disciples and said to them that the Son of Man would be given over into the hands of men, and they would kill Him, and having died, after three days, He would rise.” (Mk 9:31)

On the cross Jesus is last.

The sinless one took to Himself the sins of the whole world.

Not a single soul is left out—He served each and every one of us by dying our death, suffering our punishment, taking on Himself the guilt and selfishness of the world.

He truly had no desire to be first: no keeping track of numbers or growth or success or strength.

He did it in weakness.

He let Himself be powerless, lowest, and rejected by all *for you*.

And that's how He comes to us again today:

in lowliness, in weakness, without any clear signs of success or upward mobility.

In all our clamor for greatness and strength, in our arguments over power and success,

Jesus comes to us in weakness.

He comes to us by the Word, by the preaching of the Gospel, by a less-than-spectacular meal.

By water, wine, bread, and a man.

² Ibid., 31.

Yes, even by the disciples who so arrogantly and powerfully contended for number one—
He came by them: by their preaching and teaching and writing and love.

He called even these gruff fishermen, tax-collectors, and Zealots to be deliverymen for His Word.
And same goes for your pastor(s) here today.

Your pastor may not be best, brightest, biggest, or first.
He might not be successful or winsome or spectacular.
Numbers might not grow, giving might not increase, and board positions might not be filled.

But if you receive the pastor who comes in His name—
even in weakness, like a little child, an infant, a humble servant—
then it's not him you receive but Jesus;
and not Jesus only, but God as He fully is: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

That's what Jesus meant when he took the little child into His arms as an object lesson:
“Even if I send one of these children as a pastor in my name, preaching my Gospel,
it's I myself who comes.”

“I come with my Word,” Jesus says, no matter how humble or lowly or unspectacular or
seemingly unsuccessful.

The pastor is interchangeable.
It doesn't matter if it's Peter or James, Andrew or John, Terry or Geoff, or some other guy our
Lord has called to preach, teach, baptize and commune.

For you it's all about being given to, receiving in humility the gifts our Lord wants to give.

His gifts come in weakness and lowliness.
They come from the cross.
They come even from the mouths of babes and infants.

And when they come, when His Word of sins forgiven comes, He comes too!

He enters your knuckle-headed arguments about strength and power and turns it all on its head.
He shows you His weakness.
And you see yours.

He gives. You receive.
That's the way of the Gospel.
That's how it is with Jesus.

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