

Diakonos  
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz  
Date: September 23, 2012

14:37

A few months ago there was a teacher who delivered a controversial commencement address at Wellesley High School called "You're Not Special." In the speech, David McCullough Jr., a longtime English teacher and son of Pulitzer Prize-winning historian David McCullough, lamented students going off into the world as pampered, privileged, selfish people who only care about trophies, accolades, being the best, and being special as opposed to living the good life and doing what they are most passionate about to change the world and help other people.

The speech made national headlines with some calling it extraordinary and others calling it offensive. It was rather well received in Wellesley I hear, the graduates and their families took it as loving criticism from one of their own. But I wanted to share some of it today because I couldn't help but consider this speech when I read about those disciples arguing with each other about who was the greatest in Mark's Gospel.

Here's what McCullough said: "In our unspoken but not so subtle Darwinian competition with one another—which springs, I think, from our fear of our own insignificance, a subset of our dread of mortality — we have of late, we Americans, to our detriment, come to love accolades more than genuine achievement. We have come to see them as the point — and we're happy to compromise standards, or ignore reality, if we suspect that's the quickest way, or only way, to have something to put on the mantelpiece, something to pose with, crow about, something with which to leverage ourselves into a better spot on the social totem pole. No longer is it how you play the game, no longer is it even whether you win or lose, or learn or grow, or enjoy yourself doing it... Now it's 'So what does this get me?'"[1]

Pretty harsh, but it's sometimes true. I know that LHS requires students to perform community service in order to graduate, though I wonder if the youth of our community perform their hours to simply check this mandatory requirement off the list of all the other stuff they have to do, or if they actually soak in the experience and allow it to open themselves up to their neighbors and the world. Is it a reality check, life changing, special, significant, educational, transformative, or just another thing that they are forced to do in their already booked schedules? Do some of our youth have the so what does this get me mentality in regards to their required community service? Or the attitude that this experience will look great for colleges I'm applying to, but the experience itself is lost somehow in the process of checking off a box that makes you look good?

This attitude was present when I was in high school, the feeling that this or that activity or award or team or club or service trip will make you look better when applying for colleges. And if you're competing with the best and the brightest for scholarships and a spot at the university or college of your choice, you have to distinguish yourself somehow, right? So what does this get me is a systemic issue in our country today, that's why McCullough's speech makes some folks uncomfortable because he calls out the issues so apparent when we as individuals and a society think this way. Truth telling isn't easy and doesn't usually make you very popular.

This seemingly opportunistic attitude many people, including ourselves sometimes have of so what does this get me isn't anything new. When we look to our Gospel text for today, we see that Jesus once had to call the disciples out when they were behaving in this manner themselves. Now I love the lectionary, I love that in 3 years we can get through a great portion

of the Bible. But the problem with the lectionary is that you don't often see the ebb and flow of these passages within the context of their respective Biblical books.

So what we don't see today by reading a few verses of Mark Chapter 9 in isolation is that this story comes in the middle of Mark's Gospel and serves as a transitional illustration. Mark's Gospel is known for its action packed narrative. In the words of Methodist Pastor Paul Escamilla, "This is no sit down story. Jesus is on the move—healing, teaching, exorcising demons, feeding the hungry, and on and on . . . it is very important to notice that the one thing that slows down the pace of this Gospel is the evidence of selfish ambition on the part of Jesus' disciples. . . . When Jesus sensed that that was the subject of their conversation, he sat down."<sup>[2]</sup>

This is Jesus' wait a second, time out, hold the phone, what are you doing moment right in the middle of Mark. Now I actually just adopted a hound dog puppy a week ago named Fritz. And Fritz is only seven months old and has this great habit when he knows that he's being bad and I reprimand him and attempt to stop said bad behavior that he refuses to make eye contact or acknowledge that I'm present. This happens when I'm telling him not to chew on my laptop cord or run around the house with my hair brush in his mouth or bite my arm when he wants to play or bring that branch he's been gnawing on outside in the yard back inside the house.

But this is how I imagine the disciples react, this making no eye contact and let's pretend we didn't just completely mess up when Jesus sits down to have this difficult conversation with us. You'll notice in the text that Jesus asks, "What were you arguing about on the way?" And the disciples are "silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest."<sup>[3]</sup> They can't even bring themselves to say that this is what they were talking about as they were traveling around with a man so interesting that thousands of years later we are still debating whether or not he was married or how long he lived or what occupation he held before traveling around teaching and healing or what exactly he said verbatim about certain subjects that are still important to us today.

So Jesus sits down and he tells them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."<sup>[4]</sup> And I'll bet this is really not what they wanted to hear. What we miss in our English translation of the Greek text is that the word Mark uses to tell us that Jesus is talking about being a servant of all is diakonos. Now a diakonos wasn't just any old servant, a diakonos was known as the "servant of all" and was the servant who served meals. This servant was the lowest ranking of the servants in the entire household, only allowed to eat his or her meal once everyone else had been served. And to top it all off, the diakonos ate what everyone else hadn't finished on their plate.<sup>[5]</sup>

Imagine this for a second—it's gross but just go with it because it's important. Jesus is saying, "Whoever wants to be first must be the servant of all, who serves everyone else their meals and eats the leftovers by themselves." This would have shocked the disciples to their core. That's what we have to do to be first in the kingdom of God? And maybe then the whole notion that they were competing with each other to be the greatest didn't seem like the wisest thing to do after all. Maybe the point was to try to be the best disciple one could be, to be selfless and humble and compassionate and loving and not worry so much about being the best, being special, about having others admire you. Maybe being the greatest disciple was going to be really hard work that none of them, or us for that matter, can manage in the first place!

All of this talk about being the greatest makes me remember the story about famed orchestra conductor Leonard Bernstein. He was once asked what the hardest instrument to play was, and he replied quickly and without hesitation: "Second fiddle. I can always get plenty of first violinists, but to find one who plays second violin with as much enthusiasm, now that's a problem. And yet if no one plays second, we have no harmony."<sup>[6]</sup> This life simply can't be all

about our own personal greatness, but about the greater good. When it's not all about you all the time but the collective good, you can work with others to make something beautiful, whether it's music or building a community or anything else.

This is what Jesus was trying to get at in this time out, hold the phone moment in the Gospel of Mark. When the disciples were walking with this remarkable teacher arrogantly arguing about which one of them was the greatest follower, he pointed out that the greatest, the first, the most revered is actually the most humble, the one who serves everyone else first and eats what you don't finish from your plate—the diakonos. This should make us think about what it really means to be the greatest. And maybe we should strive to be the best people we can be knowing that none of us are perfect and spend less time trying to be the most accomplished, or the most special, or the most distinguished person around.

In this spirit, I'd like to end with a few more lines from David McCullough, what I deem to be the greatest lines of his Commencement Address. Here's what he told that group of high school graduates, and it's good advice for us all: "Climb the mountain not to plant your flag, but to embrace the challenge, enjoy the air and behold the view. Climb it so you can see the world, not so the world can see you. Go to Paris to be in Paris, not to cross it off your list and congratulate yourself for being worldly. Exercise free will and creative, independent thought not for the satisfactions they will bring you, but for the good they will do others . . . And then you too will discover the great and curious truth of the human experience is that selflessness is the best thing you can do for yourself." [7] May it be so with us. Amen.

[1] David McCullough Jr. "You're Not Special" Commencement Address at Wellesley High School 2012, [http://bostonherald.com/news/regional/view/20120607youre\\_not\\_special](http://bostonherald.com/news/regional/view/20120607youre_not_special)

[2] Paul Escamilla Analysis of Mark 9:30-27 in *Disciplines* 2012, 277.

[3] Mark 9:33-34.

[4] Mark 9:35.

[5] Sharon Ringe, Analysis of Mark 9:30-37 in *Feasting on the Word Year B, Volume 4*, 93-97.

[6] <http://www.gospel.com/blog/index.php/2010/03/16/todays-devotional-will-you-play-second-fiddle/>

[7] David McCullough Jr. "You're Not Special" Commencement Address at Wellesley High School 2012, [http://bostonherald.com/news/regional/view/20120607youre\\_not\\_special](http://bostonherald.com/news/regional/view/20120607youre_not_special)