

Priorities
[Mark 9:30-37](#)
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Yesterday was officially the first day in the BC provincial election campaign, as the province prepares to elect our next government. There's also a possibility there could be a federal election coming sooner than we think, as the various parties in the current minority Parliament in Ottawa jockey for position. And just south of the border, among our dear friends in the United States, I've heard rumours there's some kind of election going on right now as well. Now, I understand that elections are necessary, but they're also stressful. All of a sudden, all through your neighbourhood, these different coloured signs start popping up on everybody's lawns, Orange and Red and Green and Blue, and if you have young children, pretty soon they start wondering what's going on with all these signs. From a child's perspective, it looks like there are different teams with different colours, and some of your friends around the neighbourhood are on one team, and some of them are on another, and children naturally want to know which team they're on, which team is the best, who are the good guys and who are the bad guys, and it is really hard explaining all that in a way that doesn't make some of your dear neighbours into the "bad guys". We've tried to explain to our kids that all the teams have some good ideas, and each team just has something different that they think is the most important – nobody's the bad guy exactly, they just all have different priorities, and so you should support the team that cares the most about the same things you care about most. That answer helps keep the peace around the neighbourhood, but I'm not sure it's actually true. I would like to believe it's true, but sometimes it feels like the only priority some politicians have

is just winning, and all the rest of it is a means to an end, all the policy debates and party platforms are just trotted out every few years to win an election and then carefully put back in storage when they're no longer needed. Sure, politics is about priorities, but for some people, the only priority is winning, gaining power, making sure everyone knows how great you really are.

And that view of the world seems to be shared by the disciples in our reading from the Gospel of Mark. Jesus is leading his closest friends on a road trip through Galilee, because he wants to spend some time with them – they've been through a lot lately, and the disciples have had a few high-profile setbacks – so Jesus figures they can use some one-on-one time, some personal attention and encouragement and training for the road ahead, especially because that road is about to get far more difficult than it's ever been. The road will lead to Jerusalem, where Jesus will be arrested by his enemies and executed by the Roman authorities, and then three days later he'll come back to life. That mission is Jesus' priority – dying for the sins of humanity, laying down his life for the good of others, that's the whole reason Jesus is there. The entire purpose for God becoming one of us is to seek and save the lost, to rescue all of us from sin and death, that is Jesus' priority, and he needs the disciples to understand that, so that they can share that work with him and carry on his work as the church. So Jesus takes some time out of his busy preaching and teaching schedule to make training his disciples a priority, teaching them what they need to know so they can play their part in the difficult days to come.

The problem is that the disciples have other priorities. And I wish I could be charitable, and say that their priorities are admirable, worthy causes, but they aren't. Their only priority is their own selfish pride, their own desire for power and fortune and glory, to make a name for themselves. On this road trip that

Jesus has explicitly planned out as an opportunity to teach and train the disciples about the challenges that lie ahead, telling them about all the suffering and pain he's going to experience for their sake and for the world, the disciples just don't understand any of it. The very idea of self-sacrifice, of giving up your life for the good of the world, it's just too much for them to comprehend. So instead, they spend the trip arguing over which one of them is the greatest. Which one of them is the best disciple, which one of them is the most indispensable to Jesus' mission on earth, which one of them will be put in charge of which cabinet positions in the new Jesus administration when he kicks out the Romans and takes charge himself. Obviously Jesus is the Messiah, but who will be Deputy Messiah? Who gets the cushy Foreign Affairs portfolio? Obviously Matthew the Tax Collector thinks he's in line for Finance Minister, and Simon the Zealot wants to run the Defense department, and there's lots of candidates for Ministry of Fisheries, even though none of them really want the job. All along the road, while Jesus is desperately trying to connect with them and prepare them for the trouble that awaits them in Jerusalem, his disciples' only priority is themselves, their own careers, their own futures. While Jesus is talking sacrifice, the disciples are playing politics, fighting over who is the greatest, who is the most important, who is going to win in the end.

And Jesus knows that they're not listening. Jesus knows that they've completely missed the lesson he's trying to teach them, they just don't understand the sacrifice he's about to make. They're treating Jesus as a means to an end, a means to their own greatness and success. So when they reach their destination in Capernaum, Jesus tries to gently reset their priorities. He tells them that "whoever wants to be first must take last place, and be the servant of everyone else." In the movement that Jesus has started, greatness doesn't look the same as it does to the rest of the world. It doesn't look like powerful people in positions of wealth and

influence. It looks like sacrifice. It looks like suffering. It looks like the cross. All the things that Jesus was describing about his future in Jerusalem, that's the true path to greatness, when you stop making your own future a priority, and put the needs of those around you first. That's what Jesus will do when he gives up his life on the cross, as the suffering servant, the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, that's the true greatness of Jesus Christ, not in how he heals the sick or calms the storm or feeds the hungry or raises the dead, but in how he serves. But the disciples have already demonstrated that they just don't understand this kind of sacrifice. They just don't get what Jesus is trying to teach them, the idea that a King will suffer, that a God will die, that the last shall be first and the first shall be last, that is just too different from everything they've ever understood about the way the world works. And Jesus looks around the room, at these twelve blank faces, trying and failing to understand what he means. And so he makes it as simple as he can possibly make it, he decides to set aside all the complicated theology, all the predictions of what's going to happen in the future, and he puts the point in terms even these twelve dummies can understand. He brings over a child, a random, nameless child, someone who in that culture would've been considered insignificant, unimportant, expendable, and he tells his disciples – "here – see this child? I want you to love this child. I want you to put this child's needs, this child's future, ahead of your own. Welcome this child as if they are the most important person in the entire universe – as if by welcoming this child, you are welcoming me, as if you are welcoming the eternal creator of the universe who sent me. Make this child a priority, your highest priority, to serve them, to help them, if need be to die for them." Jesus takes the point that he's been trying to make to these disciples and makes it concrete – when Jesus talks about serving, it's not theoretical, it's not some elaborate metaphor, when Jesus talks about serving, he means serving this child right here, this seemingly insignificant little human

being standing right in front of you, this is the person Jesus wants you to love. And if the disciples can get that – if it sinks in that their role is to serve, to love, to sacrifice for the good of this one particular child, then they can start to realize that it's not just that child. It's every child. Once you see one child the way Jesus sees them, then you can start to see every child you meet in the same way, as someone to love, someone to serve, someone you can share all God's blessings with so they can grow strong. And then you start to see that it's not just the children, it's every human being, every single person that the world considers insignificant, unimportant, expendable. They are all children of God, and Christ's disciples are called to welcome all of them in the same way we would welcome the King of Kings, to serve and support and sacrifice for all of them in the same way we would for Jesus himself. If Jesus' disciples are going to realign their priorities so that the last are first and the first are last, so that the greatest are truly those who serve, then they just need to start with one person, one seemingly insignificant person, and put their needs first, make them a priority, welcome them as if they are the King of Kings.

It's easy to read that story and shake your head at how selfish and foolish those disciples are being, as they ignore Jesus' words and make their own power and glory their highest priority. The thing is, we do the same thing, all the time, every day. We claim to know exactly who Jesus is and exactly what he wants from us, and yet we spend so much time and effort and energy chasing after our own priorities, trying to win more power and influence for ourselves, trying to make our own positions more comfortable and secure. It is so easy to turn our faith into a matter of winning and losing, make the church just another political tool to get what we want, to make ourselves seem great. And yet the voice of Jesus Christ is still calling us to follow our savior and King on the road to Jerusalem, to

see what he has sacrificed for our sake when we were still outcasts, to recognize that when we were nothing and nobody, Jesus died for us. And now Jesus calls us to look out at the world, and see the outcasts, the nothings and nobodies of our world, all those children of God who have been pushed aside and ignored, considered unworthy of God's grace or unfit for his kingdom, and see them the way Jesus Christ sees them. Welcome them the way Jesus Christ would welcome them, as if they are the King of Kings. All our theology, all our interpretations of scripture and theories of atonement, all the creeds and hymns and sacraments and services, they're all meaningless, unless we're able to look at a child and see Jesus Christ, see someone to serve, someone to bless, someone to love with all our hearts, to make sharing the love of Jesus Christ with each and every person we meet our highest priority. Every time you see a child of God, any one of your fellow human beings who Jesus Christ died to save, see them the way Jesus sees them. See them the way Jesus sees you. As his child, his highest priority, someone worth living for, worth dying for, worth welcoming with open arms and open hearts into the kingdom of God. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen!