

Proper 20B 2021 Sermon

Mark 9:30-37

Jesus and his disciples passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for 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." But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

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

Each morning, while I sit and drink my coffee, I read the day's news headlines from the Apple News app on my iPad. Now, Apple describes its News service this way: "Apple News brings you the world's best journalism, all in one place."¹ And, for the most part, I think Apple News does a good job of selecting a wide variety of news articles from a wide variety of sources. But when I read headlines like this: "Kim Kardashian's Met Gala Look Rewrote the Red Carpet's Rules,"² I wonder if this is really "the world's best journalism."

What are "the Red Carpet's Rules"? Who is Kim Kardashian, and why should we care about what she wore to the Met Gala? For *that* matter, what **is** the Met Gala, and why should it merit our attention?

And then, there was *this* headline: "After Two Weeks At No. 2, Jeff Bezos Is Once Again The Richest Person In The World."³ Now, I **do** know who Jeff Bezos is. But when Amazon's stock price goes down and Mr. Bezos slips to #2 on the list of the world's richest persons, and then the stock goes up and he's #1 again, why is this headline-worthy? Why should you or I care?

And yet, **lots** of people *must* care about these things, or Apple News' editors (who, you can bet, know what attracts their readers' attention) would not choose these kinds of articles to post on their news service.

In today's Gospel, Jesus and his disciples are traveling to Capernaum, and once they arrive, Jesus asks them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" And we are told that "on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest." Now, I wonder: What criteria were the disciples using to determine who was the greatest? The one who knew the Jewish Bible best? The one who was strongest or most attractive? The one who could speak most eloquently? The

one who could answer Jesus' questions most correctly and quickly? The one with the most charming or forceful personality?

And then, I got to wondering, by what criteria do you or I judge who, or what, is "greatest?"

A while back, I was shopping at Walmart. It was right after the local Walmart had re-arranged their whole store, and nothing was in the same place it had previously been. A young Walmart employee who was stocking the shelves, noticed my frustration, and he asked, "Can I help you find something?" I told him what I was looking for, and rather than saying, "It's over there, by the sports section" he took me to the place the item was located. And he said something like, "Yeah, I know; everything's different, and *I* have a hard time remembering where things are now." And after he had helped me find what I was looking for, he asked, "Anything else I can help you with?" It was a simple exchange, but his kindness and willingness to be of service made my day.

As I reflected on that experience, I asked myself, "What makes a company like Walmart great?" And the answer for me, at least on that day, was, "Having employees who serve customers like that young man served me." "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all," Jesus says in our Gospel. That day, that young Walmart employee was a kind servant to me. And it blessed my day.

But this is *not* usually how our *society* judges the "greatness" of large corporations like Walmart. Society as a whole has trained us, I believe, to think that what makes a large corporation great is their annual profit, their growth, their market value, their stock price, making the Fortune 500 list.

I also think that we have been led by our society to believe that our *nation* is great when the economy is booming and the value of the investments in our retirement portfolio has increased. We *don't* judge the greatness of our nation by how we treat the most vulnerable among us, or by how many refugees fleeing war and famine we take in, or how concerned we are that poorer nations have access to vaccines (which is the only way this pandemic is going to end), or how much we are doing to address the climate crisis.

In short, we don't tend to judge the greatness of our corporations *or* our nation by the criteria Jesus speaks of in today's Gospel: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." When was the last time you heard a politician run for office with the campaign slogan, "I will be last of all and servant of all"? That isn't how you get elected in our nation.

We even tend to judge our *churches* like we judge corporations. Churches are "great" according to how **big** they are; or, to use the technical term used by church growth experts, "how many butts are in the pews." But is that really how

we *should* be appraising churches – by the number of butts in the pews? Or should we instead be asking, “How does this church live out the Gospel? How are they growing in God’s spirit, in Christ? How compassionate are they toward the least and the lost? Are they ‘last of all and servants of all?’”

My friends, I believe that a key message of today’s Gospel for us is that we should examine the unconscious, assumptive criteria by which we judge people, nations, and institutions in our world. Is a nation “great” simply because it has a booming economy and a powerful military? Or is it great because of how that nation serves the “little children” – the outcasts, the stranger, the poor? Is a corporation “great” simply because their stock price or market valuation goes up? Or is it great because of how they treat their customers and employees?

Three days ago, there was story in Apple News which was quite different from the usual. It was the story of [Dan Price](#), CEO of the Seattle-based credit card processing company Gravity Payments. Six years ago, Price slashed his own salary by \$1 million in order to pay each of his employees at least \$70,000 a year. His critics said that his business model would never work, and Price’s company would go bankrupt. But instead, the company has grown – because, Price thinks, “bigger paychecks have led to fiercely loyal employees.

“‘Our turnover rate was cut in half,’ Price says, ‘so when you have employees staying twice as long, their knowledge of how to help our customers skyrocketed over time and **that’s** really what paid for the raise more so than my pay cut.’”⁴ Andrew Hafenbrack is a professor of Management & Organization at the University of Washington in Seattle, where Gravity Payments is headquartered. Commenting on Gravity Payments’ business model and how it differs from the mindset of almost every other company, Hafenbrack asks, “Do you pay [your employees] what you can get away with? Or do you pay what you think is ideal, or reasonable, or fair?”⁴

Now, one might reason that the CEO of a company could live comfortably on, say, 10 times what his typical employee gets paid. Maybe, if the CEO’s talents are rare and valuable enough, that CEO might merit a salary 20 times that of the typical worker in their company. But according to the Economic Policy Institute, average CEO compensation is 320 times more than the salaries of their typical workers.⁴ The salary of the CEO of Western Digital, which makes computer hard drives, is 4,934 times the salary of the company’s typical employee.⁵ 4.934 times. What is CEO Dan Price’s salary? \$70,000 – the same as he pays each of his employees. And here’s the thing: Price says, “I’m **way** happier *now* than I was before.”⁴

Is Dan Price’s company one of the **greatest**? I would guess that none of us has ever heard of Gravity Payments before. It’s not on the Fortune 500 list. But on *Jesus*’ list, I have to think it is pretty near the top.

Now, the main reason I have shopped at Walmart over the years is because I can buy most everything I need in one store and at a cheap price. But if I knew that every time I walked in the door of a store I would be treated with the same courtesy and eagerness to serve which that young man in Walmart exemplified that day, I would keep coming back to that store no matter what the price. Because money can't buy what that man offered me that day: he noticed me, had respect for me as a human being, paid attention to my needs, and gifted me with an unexpected kindness that was palpable. He made my day. *And* he made me question the unconscious, assumptive criteria I've had regarding what it means to be "great."

"Jesus sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.'"

AMEN

- 1 <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/apple-news/id1066498020>
- 2 <https://www.vogue.com/article/kim-kardashian-balenciaga-met-gala-2021-look>
- 3 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/giacomotognini/2021/06/10/after-two-weeks-at-no-2-jeff-bezos-is-once-again-the-richest-person-in-the-world/?sh=1000f70a57aa>
- 4 <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/dan-price-gravity-payments-ceo-70000-employee-minimum-wage/>
- 5 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/niallmccarthy/2021/07/15/americas-most-staggering-ceo-to-worker-pay-ratios-infographic/?sh=20ead0212c56>