

THE BEST SEAT IN THE HOUSE
Mark 9:30-37
(Some ideas from “The Humility Ladder,” by Brett Webb-Mitchell, The Divinity School, Duke University)

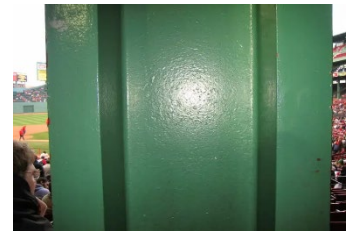
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Amarillo, Texas
November 26, 2023

Sometimes you wonder why they even put a seat there. The sermon is entitled “The Best Seat in the House,” but before we can understand the best seat in the house, let’s take a look-see at some of the worst seats in the house.

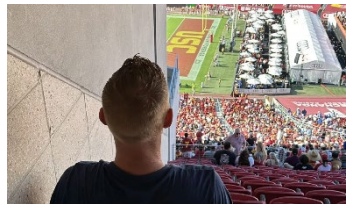
1. Fan seated in the end zone behind the scoreboard at a college football game.



2. Seat at Fenway Park.



3. USC fan seated against a wall – the only view is of the end zone.



4. Wrigley Field where a post blocks the view of home plate, all three bases, and the pitcher’s mound. All that can be seen is the outfield.



None of us wants the worst seat in the house. We all truly desire to be in the center court seat or on the 50-yard line.

In the idiom, “the best seat in the house,” the seat is in a theater (the theater is known as “the house”). The Royal Opera always reserves the best seat in the house for the king and the queen.

I'm not poking fun at you when I tell this story, because I'm guilty myself. Ever have friends go to a Dallas Cowboys game, a Texas Rangers game, a college football game – you name it – and they send you pictures of the fabulous view from their seat. They never send me pictures when their view is of a column or they are stuck in the end zone. But they always post those pictures or send out those shots when they have an envious view of all the action at hand. My sister, who knows that I always fly economy class (or whatever you call that miserable part of an airplane), sends me pictures of herself perched in a luxurious first-class suite on an international flight with two viewing screens, a little bed, and a little curtain wall to close off all distractions, knowing that her big brother flies stacked like cordwood at the back of the plane.

Yes, when I have the best seat in the house, I want you to know it. And when you have the best seat in the house, you want me to know it. “You wouldn't believe our seats!” someone says.

The best seat in the house varies from venue to venue. At Madison Square Garden, if it's a New York Knicks game, you want to sit courtside with celebrities and yell at the refs. If it's an Adele concert, you want to be close enough to see her smile.

We all – I do and you do – want the best seat in the house.

We're not the only ones. The disciples determined that Jesus was coming into His kingdom as the Messiah, the Christ. And when He set up His kingdom, they wanted – each of them – to be the greatest, to have the best seat in the house.

Our passage today is Mark 9, but the disciples do not learn their lesson. For in Mark 10, following His Passion prediction, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, come up to Jesus, saying to Him, “Teacher, we want you to do whatever we ask of you.” And He said, “What do you want me to do for you?” (Mark 10:32-41).

And they said to Him, “Grant that we may sit in your glory, one at your right and one at your left.”

Even the apostles themselves are pushing for position when it comes to being seated next to their Savior. “When you set up your kingdom,” they are saying in Mark 10, “we want to sit one at the right and one at the left hand of your glory” – the best seats in the house!

In our story today we have the account of the bickering disciples. This is the second time (the first time was in chapter 8) that Jesus make a prediction about His suffering. It's the second time that He's speaking about the suffering of the cross. And as you look at the gospels you realize that when Jesus is talking about His suffering, the disciples are busy arguing about who is greatest in the kingdom of God, who is going to ride shotgun when the Messiah ushers in His reign.

Jesus and His disciples left for Capernaum. That's when Jesus' disciples struck up one of those conversations that grows out of conflict. They were arguing over who was the best and who was the brightest and who would have the best place in the kingdom of God – the reign and rule of God on earth. It might have started because Jesus had selected three to be present at the Transfiguration. “I don't know how you think you're going to have the right hand of the throne when Jesus comes

into His kingdom. He didn't pick you. You don't even know what we saw. It was amazing. You should have seen it," perhaps said Peter and James and John to the others. "And did you notice where he positioned me?" said Peter, looking down on James and John.

It was shameful bickering.

Each disciple wanted to make sure he had the very best seat. They boast. They all stuck out their lip and pouted. There was serious emotional discord among them. They knew how to push each other's hot button by now, because they are many months into ministry together.

Jesus knows exactly what is going on. He asks them in a mawkish innocence (verse 33): "Hey, what were you talking about back there?"

He had just told them He was going to suffer, even using stronger language this time (verse 31). He is going to be delivered into the hands of men. Betrayed. They are going to kill him. Then He will rise three days later.

Jesus is talking about the most cosmic event in all of human history. And yet, they are focused on themselves.

So Jesus asks them. Surely He is hurt. How can they think about themselves, their egos, when He is talking about the cross?

They are dumbfounded. Who is going to tell Jesus they are arguing over who is the greatest, over who will sit where at the banquet feast table in the kingdom? You could hear them breathe, they were so silent. There was so much tension among the disciples you could have cut it with the proverbial knife.

Jesus grabs the moment of teaching, even as you feel the silence of shame.

In this passage, I want you to feel the silence of shame. It's pretty powerful, isn't it. How many things have you been talking about should the Master just turn around and ask you, "Hey, what are you talking about back there?" How many times would you feel the shame that can simply yield silence? How many times have you been busy grasping to be great, like the disciples, only to find at the end you exposed by your ego.

Yes, notice the shame that yields nothing but silence. They dared not utter a word.

I hope you feel the irony of this passage. They are jockeying for position to be next behind Jesus, to be in the honored position behind the long-awaited liberator Messiah. But the picture that Mark presents has a tragic-comic dimension. Jesus walks ahead in silence. He is on His way to sacrifice. He is on His way to death. He is on His way to the cross while the straggling disciples push and shove, trying to see who can be right behind him when they don't understand, they don't realize He is going to die on a cross.

They are pushing. They think it is for a place of glory. In reality, they are jockeying for a place at the suffering, at the passion of Christ.

So I want you to see the silence of shame that can come when we are grasping to be great.

We all want to be great, don't we? Don't we? What we wouldn't give to sit at the places of honor at the table. We all want the court side/ring side seat.

I don't know what it is in your life. Maybe you'd give anything to move just one rung up the ladder at the workplace. To sit in your boss's seat. Maybe you'd do almost anything to be more beautiful. Maybe it would make you happy to be more handsome. Perhaps more money would make you feel you had arrived. Or perhaps a position of power is important to you.

So we struggle and we strive, each in our own arena of life, clawing to be king of the hill and leaving carnage in our wake, manipulating and maneuvering ourselves into our long-desired position.

And even while we are grasping to be great, Jesus shames us into silence by asking the question, "What on earth are you talking about?"

As if Jesus didn't know what they are talking about.

He reaches for a child (v. 36). Children were nothing but property in those days. They had no rights. They were under the complete authority of their father – the lowest member of society in the Jewish first century. Jesus grabs the child, embraces (I imagine) the child in his arms and smooths the child's hair, hoists the child into his lap. He laughs with the child and He welcomes the child with the heart of God. It is the most generous display of humility. And in doing so, Jesus makes a statement about the nature of God's love – that God's love is most readily available and most accepted by those who are lowest in society.

Where did you find the kingdom of God then? Where do you find the kingdom of God now? It's not in the most ostentatious, pompous people who are trying to draw attention to themselves. It's not in the forceful, in-your-face styles of shrill, harsh self-presentation. No, it is in the lives of those we consider, even today, the least, the lowliest among us, the ones who fail to count as significant on the polls or surveys – maybe even those who are absent in our everyday life.

No, greatness is found in the one to whom the least attention is given. The abused child who lives a rootless life from foster home to foster home, moving too easily from one bedroom to another. It's found in the face of a young teenager considering suicide in the face of the insensitive clique of peers. It's found in the old gentleman who is now a widower, alone, scared to death, scared of death, yet unable to reach out to others for care and support because of his pride and his reluctance to disturb his family. (Brett Webb-Mitchell, "The Humility Ladder," *Journal for Preachers*, Lent 2001, p. 25)

What makes us grasp for greatness?

It happens when you and I accept the world's measures of success. Be it money. Be it power. Be it position.

That's when we become this terrible monster like the disciples. We want to be number one. We really want to be better than others. Regardless of their well-being, we want to be the best, to be great.

And the irony of all is that Jesus says, in this great radical reversal in verse 35, "If anyone wants to be first he should be last of all and servant of all." Jesus' measure of success is not the measuring rod of the world.

Jesus says, "I measure your greatness by your sense of servanthood." And when Jesus does that, it turns our world upside down, and we realize in the end we have been running in the wrong direction.

In our Upward Basketball league, it's not infrequent that a child grabs the ball and runs and shoots at the wrong basket. The whole crowd is yelling, "No. No. No. The other way." At the end of life, you and I realize that by trying to measure up to the monuments of a materialistic society that – just like that child in complete ignorance, despite the word of God urging us and shouting us to the other direction – we have been shooting at the wrong goal.

And when we finally get to the top, we realize it isn't so great anyway.

Humility is not self-hatred. Jesus isn't asking the disciples to hate themselves. It is self-forgetfulness. Pride is a concentration on ourselves. Humility doesn't call us to apologize for the qualities we lack, nor to deny the qualities we possess. "True humility," Buechner says, "doesn't consist in thinking ill of yourself but of not thinking of yourself much differently from the way you'd be apt to think of anybody else."

Two friends were meeting about a third friend. "He's a very humble man," one friend said to the other. "Well," quipped the other, "he has a lot to be humble about." What arrogance.

The fact is we all have a lot to be humble about. "What do you have," Paul asks in 1 Corinthians 4:7, "that you did not receive? But if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?" Awareness of our absolute dependency upon God is a marvelous tonic to our self-congratulating pride.

Walk this earth in pride, and God will eventually give you humility. The only way for Him to bring you into the state of humility is for Him to put situations in your life that highlight your genuine weaknesses and your total and absolute dependence upon Him. He is creator, and you are creature. (Based upon Doug Jackson, Second Baptist Church, Corpus Christi, *What's On Second*, 4/30/2001)

We must not be like the disciples. We must get past ourselves. We must have some self-forgetfulness and look at Christ, even as the disciples missed Christ that day.

Richard John Neuhaus said, “If you were half as important as you think you are, you would be twice as important as you really are.” (*Servant*, Winter 2001, p. 9)

Don't forget it.

There are some pictures – photographs taken by the Voyager spacecraft. They sent back pictures of Earth taken four billion miles away. From that distance, our whole planet Earth is nothing more than a dot on the photo of the cosmos. It measures just 1/72 of an inch. And guess what. Every one of us is in that picture. Every one of us is in that dot. The whole world – all the folks in China with us.

Congregation, we are just not as big as we think we are.

There was an award-winning gospel singer/pastor who was thinking about coming to Amarillo. Someone was so taken aback by his contract that I asked him in confidence for a copy and said I would not reveal the artist's name when used as an illustration. This gospel singer/pastor said he must have one king-size suite – for himself. And nine single rooms for the singers and the band. And when it comes to air travel, one round-trip, first class airline ticket for the pastor. Coach tickets will do for the band and the singers. And how does the pastor plan to get from his luxury king-size suite to the event, for which he is going to be paid handsomely to sing for 90 minutes? He must be driven in a luxury town car.

When I see this coming from a pastor of the gospel, from part of the people of God, I stand amazed and I say, “Have you never read Mark 9? Do you not know what it means to be Christ-like? How can you, Pastor, stand and challenge the people toward the kingdom of God if you, like the child on the basketball court, are running in totally the wrong direction?”

I struggle with it. Not just that pastor, but all of us. I struggle with it. And you struggle with it.

In the ancient *Rule of St. Benedict*, there is a wonderful illustration of humility, which is the way of Christ. Remember Jacob's ladder, upon which he saw the angels climbing up and down, ascending and descending? In the *Rule of St. Benedict* it is written that, “without doubt, we should understand that climbing up is achieved by humbling ourselves, and going down the ladder is done by praising ourselves or building ourselves up.”

Let us be drawn to this image of the ladder of humility. The only way up to the kingdom of God is to go down in our own self-estimation. The way to descend or get away from the kingdom of God is to lift ourselves up. It's the great irony of the message of Christ. Whoever wants to be great must be humble, even as a child is humble. It means in our everyday life we are to be filled with gestures of grace. It means we might be humble enough to let someone go in front of us during rush hour. To give an extra tip to someone who is caring for us. To talk to our family and focus on someone else, saying, “How was your day?” before we demand that everyone hear how our day was. For us to put everything down and pick up our children and meet them eye-to-eye and listen to them with our entire being shrouded in love to all that is going on in somebody else's life. (Brett Webb-Mitchell, p. 26)

The humility ladder. The only ladder in all the cosmos where the only way up is down and the only way down is up.