

When I called my dad a couple of nights ago, he asked me “now what car are you guys going to be driving down in?” What he was really saying is, “Dan, I hope you guys aren’t taking your CRV, that thing is on its last leg.” We took Jamie’s car and we got down here safe.

But, we like to know secrets, tips, and tricks on how to get the most out of life. “Do-It-Yourself” mechanics love this kind of stuff. Within the past couple of years my brother had a friend tell him, “Why are going to the dealer to replace your brakes...you can do that yourself! Let me tell you what you’ve gotta do.” It worked! You just might catch him at a red light or a stop sign, and he will be stopped.

Now, I got caught in a similar rabbit hole trying to save money working on my vehicle when I found out the radiator fans were no longer working to cool the engine. This happened in winter, so I thought “Well, it’s cold enough outside...as long as I am not driving up a hill, the engine shouldn’t get too hot.” But, then Spring came around and Summer was quickly approaching and I knew I couldn’t put it off any longer. So, I took it to the dealer, and they told me how much it was going to cost...and I thought, “forget it, I need a plan B.”

And I got curious, what would it take to replace the fans myself? Of course, there was some guy on YouTube that was willing to show me how to do it and

encourage me to take it on myself...it's not that hard, right?? I just needed to know what needed to be done, I just needed the right information, then I could get the best deal money could buy when it came to a brand-new radiator fan.

Well, after about 4 hours of work, half of the original bolts broken, the other half holding up new radiator fans, along with most of my front bumper removed from the vehicle, I realized I was going to need some help finishing up the job. The woes don't end there, but it's enough for us to realize that insider information, secrets about how to get the most out of life aren't really what we need. If all we find are tips and tricks for life, we just end up with half-finished projects at home in our kitchens, bathrooms, and in our garages.

If we read our gospel lesson too quickly, then we might think this is what Jesus is doing. He's letting us in on the greatest secret to life. The last shall be first and the first shall be last. If we figure out how to be last, then we'll come in first.

This is not what Jesus is teaching us. Jesus is telling us that **He is first**. **Christ, himself, is the greatest** and the rest of us aren't even in the running. As we look back over the Scripture we'll notice a Catch-22, who the real winner is, and the level playing field.

In our Gospel reading, we saw that Jesus was traveling with his disciples, teaching them along the way. And when they got to where they were going, he

asked them, “What were you guys arguing about back there?” Nobody wanted to answer that question because they were arguing about who was the greatest and something in the back of their mind made them feel embarrassed about what they’d been discussing. So, Jesus began teaching them again and he tells them, “If anybody wants to be first, they’ve gotta be last, at the beck and call of everyone.” And then, he took a small child, picked him up and said, “When you figure out how to show hospitality to a child in my name, then you will find my company close by and not just mine, but the presence of our Heavenly Father will be with you.”

Now, here’s where we find a catch-22. Jesus is using his words to back us into a corner. We are desperately in need of being freed from comparisons. We love to measure success by how well we’re doing compared to the other guys. If we were above average, that’s good. If you’re below average, well, pick up the pace and get in line with the rest of us. We think if we can just figure out the pecking order and find our place in line, then we’d finally be relieved to know that we’re not at the bottom of the barrel. So, we say I can’t believe they can afford that. Or, yeah, there’s another happy go lucky post on Facebook, but we know they’re not that happy all the time.

This is a tragic reality of our sin sickness. We're just trying to be a little better than our neighbor so that we can have some peace of mind. This is what the disciples were doing, arguing about who was the greatest! We can imagine the bickering taking place as they recalled the mission trips in Judea and Samaria. "I healed a man who was lame" "Oh yeah!? I healed a man who was deaf *and* mute." "Well, I cast out *three* demons from one woman!" As long as they could take a tally of things, they could figure out who had done the most for the kingdom of God.

As we read, we might think well, Jesus gives us a one-step program to finally beat this competitive nature we've got and uncover the greatest secret to getting the most out of life. But Christ's advice is impossible for us to make our own. "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." We hear it and we think, "Oh, finally, this is what needs to be done so that I can end up on top. Life might be tough now, but if I just humble myself and serve those who don't deserve it, then I'll be first where it really counts."

But if we take Christ up on his advice, then we're not really being a servant to anybody - we're just tricking everyone else into being last when it comes to what matters most. So, Christ's words are a catch-22! If we obey them, it only reveals how selfish our hearts can really be. So, Christ isn't giving us the secret to

life...he's telling us that **he is the greatest** of all people. **He is first** over and above all humanity. He can rightfully take this place of honor and glory because he lays down his life as a servant to all people. He is the only one who can win a competition in humility because he acts completely and totally out of love. He is the real winner, but it's only because he lays down his life for us.

This is what Jesus was trying to tell his disciples on the way. He tells his disciples, "the Son of Man is to be betrayed in human hands and they will kill him, and that after being killed, he will rise again." He will prove to be the real winner even when it comes to the cross. He will be first even when it comes to the resurrection.

This can be challenging for us to hear. The disciples heard this teaching from Jesus, and they were afraid. We hear this teaching for what it is, and we think "well wait a second, I was enjoying my place in the competition here. I think I had a good shot at beating the other guy." We want to make our lives are a little better in one way or another. We want to be able to say, "I figured it out, if I handle my time in this way then I actually can get more out of life. I can get the edge on the competition." We come to God and we want him to tell us about how to manage our money, how to maintain our relationships, how to deal with stress, how to make our lives a little better - a little better than the other guy. But God comes to

us to tell us that the best he has to offer us, the most that he can give us is last place and a dead Jesus.

Because we don't need just a little help. We don't need to be above average. What's the average life expectancy after 120? It's not good. We don't need a life of beating averages - of squeezing the most out of life. We need a resurrection. We need forgiveness for the things that we've gotten wrong and thinking that the things we've gotten right makes us better off than our neighbor. This good news frees us from the competition of comparisons. When we hear that **Christ is first**, we realize that we're not chasing after anything more. Christ has stooped to the lowest of the low so that he might reach us and free us from trying to figure out the pecking order of this life. **Christ is first** and we are free.

So, what does this mean for St. Mark during this 60th anniversary of ministry? Now, we are all aware that 2020 was a difficult year. There was a study done assessing the health of church culture from 2014 to 2019. The study showed that at least 4,500 churches closed their doors in 2019. As they reflected on the data, trying to project/forecast what the data might show in 2020, they said that America could experience twice, maybe three times the amount of church closures when compared to 2019. 13,500 churches. But here we are in St. Mark Lutheran Church celebrating 60 years of ministry. Now, if the comparison game is brought

to an end by Christ taking 1st place in the world and our lives, what do we do with this data?

We might have been tempted to say, “Well, we did a better job. Those other churches just didn’t make the cut.” But we have to deal with a much more sobering reality. God has kept the doors of St. Mark open for 60 years. He wants Christ to be first here, in this building among you, his people. We can’t know why God allowed all those other churches to close their doors but yours have been kept open and we know that God is the one behind it all.

So, remember that **Christ is first** over all of creation because he has made himself a servant, available at the beck and call of whoever prays to him. This levels the playing field in life, freeing us to live the life God has called us to. Amen and Amen