

A Heart to Serve

The Reverend Peter Cook

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The First Congregational Church of Burlington, United Church of Christ

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Mark 9:30-37

³⁰They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; ³¹for 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.” ³²But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

³³Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” ³⁴But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. ³⁵He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” ³⁶Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.

When I was about 10, I enjoyed playing kickball. I can remember how wonderful it felt to kick that big yellow ball and have it fly high in the air over all my peers as I successfully ran all the bases. That was the fantasy.

I must confess that my peers had another fantasy that always had something to do with 14. That’s right during PE class, I was the number 14 draft pick for someone’s kick ball team. In the kick ball world, 14 is the number which sticks in my mind as the kid who would always get called last. The whole process was quite tortuous. The physical education teacher would pick the captains for each team. Their qualifications, in my view, had more to do with being the teacher’s pet than their athletic ability. The rest of us lined up in the yard doing our very best to show off our athletic prowess waiting to be picked by these captains.

It was torture. A lot of us end up seeking purpose and meaning for our lives living into a fantasy that one day we will kick the ultimate ball far over the heads of all our opponents. In this way, we can then elevate ourselves to the number one draft position where we can be proclaimed the greatest in the kick ball hall of fame.

One of the things I love about the disciples is that they are profoundly human. In the Gospel of Mark, do you know what is the most recurring phrase? "They did not understand!" I appreciate Mark's affirmation of our imperfection as followers of Jesus. In the disciples there is some saint and a whole lot of sinner too.

In this text, those disciples are squabbling among themselves about who is the greatest. Listening to the disciples would be a little like listening to a bunch of people with outsized egos debriefing their exploits at the latest kick ball game. Perhaps the disciple's arguments about greatness were not unlike those arguments overheard in their time. In the ancient world, for instance, there were some in the Jewish community who regarded children as not being very important. They scored number 14 on the social ladder but nowhere near number 1. It was also the case that if you were a widow your score was maybe an 11 in the eyes of some. If you were a shepherd, known for being in the ancient world the rough equivalent of a sketchy pawn shop owner, you were maybe a 12. In our own time, we too often participate in unpleasant practices where we classify people. Some are elevated to greatness while others are left behind.

For instance, why is it that a child with learning disabilities or who struggles with a second language and who needs extra help is regarded as a financial burden on society? At the same time, so many of us who earn money, who have won the kick ball game of life, think nothing of the financial benefits we receive in tax breaks. In our world, we reward you for being married if you are a man married to a woman but if you are a man married to a man or a woman married to a woman you have to pay more tax than heterosexual people do. In our world, who you love has an arbitrary financial consequence where some get to be number 1 and others number 14. Or in our world, some can put just about any imaginable food item on their table while others can only afford cheap fattening junk food because they don't have good access to affordable fruits and vegetables. Many do not have any food at all. And yet the poor draw our scorn for being hungry or overweight. Sometimes we live in a great state of denial about our privilege.

I remember when I studied economics in Washington D.C. my peers and I took a field trip to the Department of the Treasury. Just outside the Treasury building we had to step over three homeless men who were sleeping on the heating grates. With the images of these three homeless men sleeping outside on those grates emblazoned in our minds, we sat in a wood paneled room, as we listened to Paul Craig Roberts, the Deputy Treasury Secretary at the time, explain to us in a scornful way, that poor people had it pretty good in the United States compared to other countries. Therefore, he asserted that there were really no poor people in the United States. In the United States, Roberts seemed to say we were all winners compared to other countries. And yet his quest to define our greatness as a nation masked the radical inequities. Inequities not only between the United States and poorer countries but among our own people. There are so many examples where we try to establish our greatness over others without looking at our own privilege.

Primarily defining people's greatness by their economic accomplishment, their emotional or familial affections, or their physical attributes have tragic consequences. The more we focus on exclusivism the closer we come to those squabbling disciples who lost their way as they argued about who was the greatest.

Drawing on the more inclusive strains of the Jewish tradition, Jesus understood that these kick ball sort of arguments on the school yard and among the disciples cannot be the way we come to define who we are as individuals or as a group or even as a nation. Greatness is not defined by how much money we can hoard, trophies we can display, the Botox we inject into our skin, or weapons we can stockpile to retain our preeminence.

Instead, Jesus lifted up a child, who some regarded as being of lowly estate, so as to remind us that true greatness is not defined by status or our economic and social position. Greatness is defined as having a servant's heart. Greatness is about picking up a cross to serve others.

As I ponder Jesus' welcome of the child I cannot help remember an athletic story from my childhood that went a little better than my kick ball days. Somewhat athletically lost and clumsy, my dad bought me a cheap tennis racquet and a can of balls. I did not waste a lot of time, bounding down to the Martin Luther King, Jr. tennis courts at my school. One day, as when I was playing with my friends, I met a man named Andy Jong. Andy Jong was a rather short man with a really big laugh who befriended me and my somewhat gawky group of friends and offered to give us lessons for a very modest cost. And so once a week Andy patiently came and hit ball after ball at us on those worn out public courts where you could barely see the lines and had torn nets. He gave us great instruction. It is not an understatement that Andy, through his welcome and his ministrations through a tennis ball, turned around my life and put me on a better path. I am pretty clear that I would not be standing here today if it were not Andy. Andy welcomed me, he made a big difference in my life, and he helped me eventually get the number 1 spot on my high school tennis team some years later. Everyday, when I struggle, I think about Andy hitting balls at me and offering his encouraging words. As we think about Christian service, I think about another man named Jake. I met Jake a few weeks ago and he told me how he planned to teach kids this winter in inner city New Orleans. He also told me about his work right here in Burlington teaching poor kids tennis. When Jake asked me if I would help him with his clinic, I jumped at the chance to teach kids from the King Center. As I soak up Jake's enthusiasm and I hit one ball after another and look at those kids, I see a little of that child in me starting out. And as the balls fly across the net, I think about how Andy went out of his way to help my friends and I at really critical time. I also want to give back.

One of the blessings of being at First Congregational Church, is the incredible diversity of people who come through our doors every day. I just love coming to work each day and greeting such a wide variety of people who bear the gifts of their personhood. There are so many people here with a story to tell and perspective to

offer. Discipleship and Christian Service in my view always begins with a welcoming heart where we do our best to suspend our judgment about people and learn to receive them on their own terms. Moreover, service is not about just doing stuff for others while keeping them at arms length. Instead, we also must learn how to receive what others have to offer even from those we think have nothing to offer. Christ teaches that we are all partners in service where everyone has something to give and where we humbly come to realize that all of us stand in need of God's redeeming grace.

May all of us learn to grow in faith and love as we serve others and walk the rocky road of faith following the one who claims our lives and our hearts. And that, my friends, makes for one heck of a good kick ball game.