

Jeopardy
 Mark 10: 35-45
 October 18, 2009
 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time
 First Federated Church
 Peoria, Illinois
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Have you ever watched the television show *Jeopardy*? The premise of the show is that contestants are given an answer and they must come up with the question that goes with the answer. For example, under the category of "US Presidents" if the answer on the board reads "Abraham Lincoln" the question could be "Who was the 16th President?"

So, what would be the question with the answer "The Rolling Stones," "the conundrum of competition" and "greatness?" The three points in today's sermon!

My second favorite Rolling Stones song is "You Can't Always Get What You Want." This is the first thing that struck me in today's text. James and John, the sons of Zebedee, took Jesus aside one day. Speaking in the hushed whispers indicative of conspiracy, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you."

Word of warning, I learned long ago that you should always be wary of someone who innocently comes to you and says, "Would you do me a favor?" After being burned a few times I learned to ask, "Maybe, exactly what is the favor?"

In a like spirit Jesus replied, "What do you want me to do for you?"

"Grant us to sit at your left and right hand when you come into your kingdom." Let us be your key people. Let us have the positions of authority. Let us have the places of honor.

"You don't know what you are asking," Jesus replied.

"Oh, yes we do."

"No you really don't. But even if you did, it's not mine to give and, more importantly, it's not yours to have. It has been prepared for another."

You can't always get what you want. This is one of life's hardest lessons. There are some things in life that no matter how hard you work, how hard you prepare, how much passion you muster, how much you want it, you can't get it because it's not yours to have. But that doesn't mean, in the words of the Rolling Stones, that you don't get what you need. Just because you don't get what you want, that doesn't mean that you don't have a life-giving relationship with Jesus. James and John did not walk away from Jesus. They continued on the journey.

The conundrum of competition is this, it brings out the best in products but the worst in people. Competition has brought both the size and price of cell phones down. It has improved fuel economy and automobile safety. But it doesn't necessarily bring out the best in people. A recent magazine article named the 20 meanest coaches. They are coaches who are willing to do anything to win on the field of competition. For example, there are Bob Farley and Shaun Farr. The two coached a baseball team

made up of 9 and 10 year old children in Bountiful, Utah. Two teams, the Yankees--coached by Farley and Farr, met, coincidentally enough, the Red Sox for a championship game. The Red Sox's best hitter was at the plate with two outs and a runner on third. The Yankees were ahead by one run. On deck was a kid named Romney Oaks. He was a notoriously weak hitter but his team forgave his lousy play because from the age of four he had been treated for a malignant brain tumor. The toxic doses of radiation left him frail.

Assessing the situation, Coach Farley consulted with assistant Coach Farr. Coach Farley then marched out to the pitcher's mound and instructed his pitcher to intentionally walk the batter and pitch to the sick boy. Parents were stunned. Romney's 8 year old sister began to cry. Romney fought back tears as he stepped into the batter's box. He struck out on three pitches. The Yankees won, but somehow the win seems hollow, doesn't it?

But this isn't the worse example. This example didn't even make the top 10. There is Bill Belichick, a three-time Super Bowl winning coach of the New England Patriots. He's a notorious cheater whose been fined a half a million dollars by the NFL. The meanest coach award goes to a fellow named Mark Downs, Jr. In 2005 this T-ball coach--that's right a T-BALL coach in Dunbar, Pennsylvania--offered one of his players a cash bonus to injure a member of *his own team!* Coach Downs told 8 year-old Keith Reese, Jr. to use the pregame warm-up to bean 9 year-old Harry Bowers so that he couldn't take the field in a crucial play-off game. Harry Bowers was autistic and visually impaired.

Explained to the 9 year-old after the incident, "Coach told me that if I hit Harry in the face with the ball, he'd pay me \$25 and then Harry would be out of the game." Now you have to realize that in most T-Ball leagues, *everyone* bats and *everyone* plays.

When Keith Reese's first attempt hit his teammate in the groin, Coach Downs told him to "try hitting him harder." The next ball struck Harry's ear, drawing blood and sending him to the hospital. Downs, the father of four--including two girls who played on the team--was charged with criminal solicitation to commit aggravated assault. Harry's mom said that the incident left her son scared of sports.

Competition can even invade church league softball. Several years ago I played on a team that won a tournament after losing their first game and coming up through the losers' bracket. We had to beat the same team two consecutive times and when all was said and done, it was about a quarter to midnight. The exhausted teams waited on the diamond to receive their trophies. The only people left in the stands were the wives and girlfriends of the players. When it was announced that the team I played on was the tournament's first place team, the silence of the hot, muggy August night air was broken by a woman yelling, "Oh, yeah?! Well, we're first in the heart of *Jesus!*"

When the disciples in our gospel lesson heard what James and John had asked for, they were indignant. There was dissension within the ranks. Their unity of purpose was fractured because two of their number wanted an advantage.

Competition brings out the best in products, but all too often it brings out the worst in people.

This dissension in the ranks caused Jesus to talk to his disciples about **what greatness looks like in the eyes of God**. This is the third lesson in the story.

“You know,” Jesus said to his disciples, “how people in the world, when they get a little bit of power it goes to their head; they like to throw their weight around? That’s not how it is suppose to be with you--my disciples. If you want to be ‘great’ in the eyes of God, in the work of God’s Kingdom, then you’ve got to learn how to be a servant. True greatness is seen in serving others.”

Jesus knew that what this world needs is not more “takers” but “givers.” I find it interesting that next week’s lesson immediately follows this one. It is Jesus’ exchange with a blind man name Bartimaeus. In their little exchange Jesus asked Bartimaeus, “What can I do for you?” In other words, “How can I serve you?”

A generation ago a young United States President fired the imagination of a generation when he said in his inaugural address, “Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.” His call to service echoed the words of Jesus. His disciples are to be a servant people. You and I are called to be a servant people.

Would you join me in prayer?