

## **The Great Reversal**

Psalm 42; Mark 9:30-37

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My first church out of seminary was out in the country. Route 4 in Etowah County. We had a cow pasture on one side of the church, and a cornfield was on the other. Most of the members of the church were either truck drivers, factory workers, or farmers. Wonderful people. Kelly and I lived in a newly built parsonage behind the church. The church wasn't able to pay me much, but they made sure we ate well, especially during the summer months. On many Sunday mornings during the growing season, one of the farmers—wearing overalls, no shirt, sweaty—knocked on our door early. We came to expect this and looked forward to receiving the bag of freshly harvested produce from his garden: tomatoes, onions, squash, corn, whatever was coming in. His name was Russell Winningham, and he was a prince of a man. An hour later he would be in a suit and tie in Sunday School and then in the choir during worship.

One morning the doorbell rang. I went to the door expecting Mr. Winningham to be there in his overalls and no shirt with a bag of produce. But this time it was a stranger. He introduced himself as Mr. Bourbon, and it appeared to me that he might have had a sip or four or five, at 7:30 a.m. He was poorly dressed, and his demeanor caused me to think that something was not right. Mr. Bourbon rather loudly informed me, "I'm gonna to join your church today."

I thought, "Well, this is just fine. I'm going to get a new member today, and it is Mr. Bourbon."

I got to church, and there was Mr. Bourbon sitting on the front step waiting for someone to unlock the building. We didn't have a Jim Davis. He went to a Sunday School class, then took a seat in the sanctuary for worship, and during the final hymn, as promised, he stepped into the aisle and walked forward to join our little church on Route 4 in Etowah County.

After I learned his story, I was terribly embarrassed. His name wasn't Bourbon. It was Verbon. He had cognitive deficiency. He lived with his family in a poor section of our community some called "tin can alley," because it was strewn with tin can. I suspect in most places Verbon was treated poorly, mocked, looked down upon, possibly even bullied. The people of my church got to know and love him. When he came to that little rural church in Etowah County, he was treated with respect and dignity. He joined the choir, even though he couldn't read words much less music. He stood next to Mr. Winningham and sang with gusto.

I have the Nextdoor App on my phone. It connects the neighborhoods of southeast Huntsville, so people can communicate with each other. If you lose a dog or have a yard sale, you can post in on the Nextdoor App. The longest thread I've read on this app is about a man walking over Cecil Ashburn. A lot of people were interested. I learned that this man might be like Verbon. I wonder this: how does the world treat him? Is he treated poorly, mocked, looked down upon, and possibly even bullied? Is there some place where he is treated with respect and dignity?

Jesus taught that that is paramount in the Christian community. Christian faith is not about kowtowing to the shakers and movers. It's not about fawning over people who have the ability to help us. No, in the Kingdom of God, he said, a great reversal is taking place where faith is measured by the welcome we extend to the vulnerable and powerless.

They were in Capernaum, a small fishing village on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. It had become Jesus' headquarters during his Galilean ministry. Mark says that he and his disciples went into "the house," possibly the home of Peter and Andrew. A conversation takes place in which Jesus teaches his disciples something important about his way. Apparently the disciples had been arguing as they traveled to Capernaum, so Jesus asked them what they had been arguing about. Mark says that they were silent. I can see them in my mind hanging their heads and looking at each other out of the corner of their eye, like children who've been caught doing something wrong.

Jesus knew what they had been discussing; perhaps he overheard them. They were arguing about which of them was the greatest.

“I’ve been with him longer than you have, so I’m the greatest!”

“Yeah well, he clearly loves me more, so I’m the greatest!”

“But I walked on water, and you didn’t; I’m the greatest!”

They should have hung their heads in silence.

Jesus didn’t roll his eyes. He didn’t scold them. He sat down, Mark says, taking the posture of a teacher. Then he did something nobody in that day and time would have expected. He took a child into his arms, and this is what he told his embarrassed disciples,

*Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.*

Why would nobody have expected that? Why was this such an important object lesson? Because he used a child, an act one of my old professors calls “revolutionary in first-century Galilee” (Alan Culpepper, *Smyth and Helwys Commentary*, “Mark,” p. 312). Revolutionary because children occupied a different role in their culture than they do in ours. Today children are the center of our families and society, cherished, protected, even revered. Not so in Jesus’ day. In ancient Judaism, children were barely tolerated by men. Rabbis, respected teachers in their culture, in particular did not associate with children. Here’s a warning from one Rabbi Dosa ben Harkinas, “Morning sleep, mid-day wine, chattering with children, and tarrying in places where men of the common people assemble destroy a man” (Ibid.). So chattering with children was put in the same destructive category as sleeping late, drinking wine during the middle of the day, and associating with common people!

Verbon. A man walking over Cecil Ashburn. A child. The vulnerable and powerless. Jesus took a child, placed the child before these disciples who were arguing about which of them was the greatest, and taught them one of the great truths of the Kingdom of God,

*Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.*

Our generation had one who understood and lived this. She died in 1997. Mother Teresa lived in Calcutta where she and her Sisters of Charity ran hospices for people with HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and leprosy; soup kitchens; mobile clinics; orphanages; schools; and other ministries. Members of her order make the three traditional vows of priesthood: poverty, chastity, and obedience. However, her sisters make a fourth vow: to give "wholehearted free service to the poorest of the poor." She once said,

*I used to pray that God would feed the hungry, or do this or that, but now I pray that he will guide me to do whatever I'm supposed to do, what I can do. I used to pray for answers, but now I'm praying for strength. I used to believe that prayer changes things, but now I know that prayer changes us and we change things.*

In the Kingdom of God, present in the world right now, a great reversal is taking place where faith is measured by the welcome we extend to the vulnerable and powerless. Our faith is measured not by the money we've made or the accolades we've received. It's measured, Jesus said, by servanthood, being last of all and servant of all. That is greatness in this community of the great reversal.

#### Closing Prayer

Lord, give us eyes to see them, the vulnerable, the powerless, the ones who need your and our love. And give us hearts to respond. Amen.