

Sermon: Ways of Wisdom Rev. Mark Bigelow

Scripture Readings: Psalm 1, Mark 9:30-37

As many of you know I am a major Denver Broncos football fan. I know that there are two local teams I could choose from, but football loyalties, like major personality traits, tend to be set at a very early age. Repeated viewing of football before the age of two tends to lock one into one team for life. It would take extensive therapy sessions to cure me of this addiction. I will even let you in on a secret to illustrate my Broncos fanaticism. I switched from Cablevision to DirecTV just so I could order the NFL package and be able to view the Broncos game each week. This also means I can watch all the NFL games—not that I have the time.

I say all of this because I want to begin my sermon talking about Mike Shanahan. You would have to be a real football fan to know that Shanahan is the head football coach of the Broncos. In Denver he is so well known that most people don't even refer to him by his name, they just call him the Mastermind. I follow Broncos news by reading the local newspapers on-line and the Denver sportswriters consistently refer to Shanahan as the Mastermind. This is a tribute to his leadership of the Broncos to their Super Bowl championships. And even though last year they had an awful season Shanahan didn't lose his Mastermind label.

Shanahan acquired this label partly due to his cerebral approach to the game. When he became head coach of the Broncos he brought the West Coast offense of the San Francisco 49ers and brilliantly modified it to fit the Broncos personnel. He is also a workaholic who understands every aspect of every game. One of the coach's innovations was his play-calling sheet. He decides prior to each game what will be the first 20 plays he will call in the game. And barring a real disaster he follows his script exactly. Of course, anyone who is going to be called Mastermind has to have proved it. And Shanahan only has to show his Super Bowl rings to prove his credentials.

Brilliant, competitive, hard-worker—these are the conventional adjectives to describe a successful coach, in fact they are commonly used to describe any successful person. In business, politics and even academia the measures of success are how much we know, who we know, how hard we work and, most importantly, how much we achieve. Conventional wisdom has it that the more championship rings you have (or impressive titles, or trophies) the greater you are.

Conventional wisdom never really changes. Certainly the definition of success isn't much different today than it has been for thousands of years. So when the disciples, following Jesus just out of earshot, argue about who is going to be the greatest we know what they are talking about. They want to know who will get the Super Bowl ring of discipleship.

Who is going to stand on the podium and receive the gold medal for the follower marathon? Who will be the Apostle-of-the-year?

Now let's be clear—achieving greatness is not in and of itself a bad thing. This week we are witnessing many incredible athletes achieve the pinnacle of their sporting success. To watch a human being strive to push the boundaries of the possible is truly an awesome experience. Competitiveness is what makes sports interesting. It makes much of life interesting. I wouldn't be spending my afternoon glued to the television if I didn't enjoy the excitement of competition.

Unfortunately the values that govern success on the sports field often become the values that determine success off the field. Family life begins to resemble the World Wrestling Federation when parents struggle to be in control and successful instead of showing love and compassion for their children. Divorces become a full-contact sport when the participants forget that they are struggling to determine what is best for them all rather than winning for themselves. And politics degenerates into cock fighting when the success of a party, or a candidate takes precedence of the welfare of the country or community. This is what has happened to our hapless disciples. They want to know who will win the Jesus game.

This is the context for one of Jesus' most memorable actions. After telling them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all," he shows them what he means by pulling a child into their midst. A child, sweetness and light. I think when most people picture this scene they think it must be something like the children's time I do during the morning worship. We're waiting for Jesus to say, "Don't kids say the darndest things?" We tend to associate this scene with the innocence, tenderness, joy and innocence of children. Isn't Jesus saying that we must recapture the innocence of our childhood? We just need to become like children again. Perhaps get in contact with our inner child.

That is not why Jesus brought the child into their midst. Children were not seen as symbols of sweetness and innocence in Jesus' time. In fact, children weren't seen at all. And they certainly would never be with an important teacher like Jesus. Children were non-persons in the ancient world. There is more than one account in ancient literature of children being found on rubbish heaps, and when found alive were put into slavery by those who found them. Children had very utilitarian roles as laborers for most people in their world. They also didn't have much of a chance of survival. Recent scholars estimate that 60% of children died before the age of 16. When Jesus brought that child into their midst the disciples would not have had a sweet smile on their faces like we do when the children come forward for my stories each Sunday. No, the disciples would have been shocked. Yet, what better way to illustrate that the first will be last than to show them a non-person and say, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

This is not the conventional wisdom of success. What kind of wisdom is this? This is the kind of wisdom that Walt Whitman wrote of, "Wisdom is not finally tested in the

schools, Wisdom cannot be passed from one having it to another not having it, Wisdom is of the soul, is not susceptible of proof, is its own proof.” This isn’t conventional wisdom of competition, knowledge, contacts and achievement. This is a deeper measure of a person. This wisdom values humility, courage, love, perseverance and compassion above all other virtues.

Jesus ways of wisdom begins with humility—to be the last of all. Or as the prophet Isaiah said, “Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, and shrewd in their sight.” Jesus didn’t prove himself by standing in the middle of an Olympic podium, but in the center of a crucifixion. The Christian form of humility is not just declining credit for a job well done. It’s not simply insuring that the glory of whatever you do is shared or even given to another. It is not so easy as keeping the spotlight off yourself and onto someone else. Christian humility is the willingness to be seen as a failure in everyone’s sight but God’s. This is the capacity to do the wrong thing for the right reason.

This form of humility takes great courage. As the Rev. Peter Gomes has written, “The search for wisdom requires in the first instance not brains but courage and the willingness to carry on despite the evidence on the one hand and the lack of evidence on the other; and that truly is an unconventional bit of wisdom.” Those who follow the wisdom of Jesus “love truth more than their own possession of it. They are unwilling to give up it all up as a lost cause when there is not instant gratification of their highest desires. I prayed for peace all week last week and there’s still war in the world. I prayed for the hungry and there are still people going without. I prayed for this and the problem isn’t resolved.” The people who persevere against all odds are the people upon whom the welfare of the world depends. They are people who maintain impossible standards, hope, and values against all conventional wisdom.

This unconventional spiritual wisdom that requires such humility, courage and perseverance is not forged in the limelight of worldly success. It doesn’t come to us by winning games and gathering accolades. This sort of wisdom comes from living through failure, from knowing pain, by walking through the valley of death. A great mystic once said, “Of what avail is the open eye if the heart is blind.” True wisdom never divorces us from the travails and sorrows of the world but teaches us to live with grace in the midst of them. This is one of the greatest gifts of being part of a congregation such as ours.

Every couple of years or so it seems I become completely fed up with saying good-bye to people. This feeling comes to me after having a number of people leave my life in a short period of time. And since I am part of a congregation of several hundred people odd are that some of them are always going to be leaving—either through deaths or relocation. You will know I am at that stage when you hear me screaming down the hallway of the church, “Nobody else is allowed to move!” I hate saying goodbye. It is painful. And the more people you know and love the more times you are going to experience this pain. It is a simple numerical fact. So being part of a church guarantees many funerals and going away parties and, thus, much sadness and pain. Occasionally I yearn for the solitary life away from so many people so I don’t have to experience all of loses. Recently, though, I have begun to recognize that pain as one of the greatest gifts of the church. Now that is

certainly unconventional wisdom—pain as a gift. But it can be. That may have been one of the reasons Jesus brought the little child into the midst of the disciples. He wasn't trying to lighten the mood, but to depress it. Children probably reminded them less of frivolity and innocence, and more of death and sorrow. They would have been a painful reminder of the fragility of life and the loss of dreams.

To be truly wise one must have a courage, humility and perseverance that is forged through loss and pain. We are able to do this because we have the spirit of God supporting us and leading us onward. The disciples could go on because they had the physical Jesus leading them. We go in this unconventional wisdom of faith because we have Jesus' words and the vision of our religion to guide us.

So if you learned anything from this sermon you learned where to find me during a Denver Broncos football game. If you learn anything from this beautiful story from Mark's gospel you will seek to know God's wisdom that will guide you through all the ways of your life.