

Working for failure in 2012

— 12/29/2011

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My article for our church's January newsletter...

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And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you discussing on the way?" But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me." (Mark 9:33-37 ESV)

People want status. We naturally jostle like the disciples. Sometimes subtly in ways that look spiritual. Sometimes it's just a raw and obvious grab. Often it is jockeying for our place at the table.

The Jesus Team was on a good mission. There isn't any doubt this was a great cause and a worthwhile purpose. Day in and day out the disciples gave of their time and energy for Jesus. What's wrong with that? What's wrong with wanting a better spot within the team, all the better to serve the master and his mission?

But the disciples are mysteriously silent. Why? Perhaps they are ashamed they were arguing, so they are embarrassed about the fight but not the heart of the conflict. Maybe there was something Jesus said that made it obvious their carrying on was inappropriate. They were arguing, but he asked what they were "discussing."

Jesus sits down, calling the disciples to gather round. Then he gets up and brings a child into their gathering. In a third step, he takes the child into his arms. Jesus loves this kind of teaching, playing out a teaching like a little game in front of his followers. But what is the meaning?

We misunderstand Jesus and the "child" in our day. For us it is about children being more innocent and carefree and creative and playful and trusting than adults. But a "child" is nobody here. No social status. No economic use. Brought into the middle of the gathering.

This is leadership. What happens when people push and shove or more subtly jockey for status? There is no family. There is no team. They suddenly fracture into individual pursuits, each one for their own interest. To lead in this kingdom and in this family means becoming the slave of a nobody. This is not some kind of theoretical appearance of being last. It is actually being last. Actual, gritty, grimy last. Pouring out for someone who is no one. Leadership is not being more and higher than others. It is the family being more important than the individual. Imagine a team of people leading in that way.

See the amazing transformation, the group dynamic here? When leaders lead like this, their individualism as the most involved and most committed part of the team becomes part of the whole group dynamic. Their energy lifts up the community, rather than tearing it apart.

Another change happens. What about the child? We never think about the child. The child was nothing. Alone. Useless. Now the child like the servant-leader is no longer an individual. Status is transformed from *bottom of the food chain* (which the disciples wanted to be on top of) to *belonging as an honored part of the family*. Honored? Honored and served by the greatest. The whole body transformed from bickering leaders grasping for status and power with a neglected nobody, to something new where the most committed are servants and the most disenfranchised belong.

I've seen this before. In church. Many passive people. The few who are more interested and more committed, and in their own ways have the tightest grasp on status and power. Those who pass through or hang around the edges,

nobodies neglected by the rest. This is the church. This is human. This is us.

So I'm a pastor. How do I lead a church to be different? Apparently, Jesus wants me to become the servant of the disenfranchised. But I know what will happen. The grabbers will keep grabbing. Fighting over tradition and power while the marginalized remain so. The passive will remain passive. Not caring to add anything positive, just watching and pointing out what's wrong and not doing a darn thing that is productive or helpful. Again the child is forgotten. The marginalized are still marginalized. The way Jesus says to lead does not make sense. Surely it won't work. It can't work.

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And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What do you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" And they said to him, "We are able." And Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized, but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared." And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John. And Jesus called them to him and said to them, "You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:35-45 ESV)

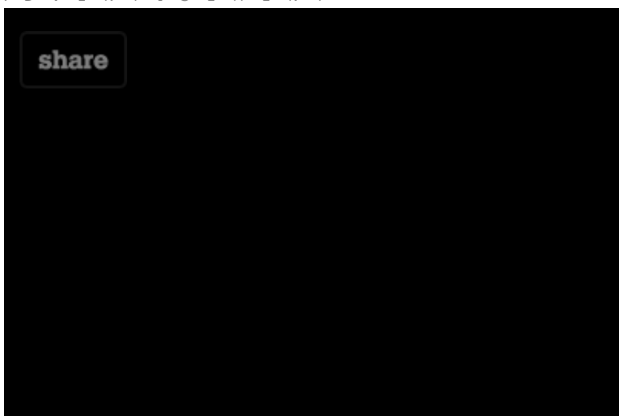
Leading is committing to fail. I don't mean theoretically. I mean literally. If you lead the way Jesus says to, you are following the way of the cross. The cross is a failure in every earthly way. It doesn't make sense to clear-thinking people. In case I think there is another way to lead, there is another incident to think about. What was a mystery to the disciples is painfully clear to us now. James and John wanted to sit to the left and right of Christ on his throne. They evidently temporarily settled their differences over who got the privileged spot, recognizing that together they surely must be the top two.

What is painfully obvious is that they would take their place at Christ's right and left. But it was not a throne they had grabbed for. It was a cross. The kind of leadership Jesus advocates leads to the kind of destination it led Jesus to. Servant-leadership is not a certain kind of style. It is a substantially different way of looking at things, and it is destined to fail. The only way it would make sense would be if God was in it. If God showed up. And I will not see that ahead of time, unless it happens at some point down the road. For now I am leading toward the cross, purposing to fail in 2012.

Pastor Jon

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2 THOUGHTS ON "WORKING FOR FAILURE IN 2012"



kirkistan

— 12/31/2011 AT 6:07 PM

Thank you for writing this. I especially like "Leading is committing to fail. I don't mean theoretically. I mean literally." Jesus' way seems so inevitably to lead to failure. And yet.

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profanefaitn

— 12/31/2011 AT 6:19 PM

It's visceral for me right now, something I really need to commit to. And not theoretically!

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