Sunday, September 29, 1985
WHO'S NUMBER ONE?
Mark 9:30-37

"Who's number one?" is the question on the minds of most sports fans this time of year. In college football, there's a new rating every week during the fall season, and there are frequent changes in the ratings. However, it's not only in football that we try to determine who's number one, or in other words, who's the greatest. Our society and we, as individuals, have our own rating systems which we apply to ourselves and others all the time. Even the disciples of Jesus were not immune from this tendency of wanting to rank themselves and others and of making comparisons.

Let's see how it happened — and then we'll look at what this story from the Bible has to say to us in our time.

According to this story just read from the Gospel of Mark, Jesus had been trying to explain to his disciples that one day soon he would be arrested, put on trial, and then executed. But he also told them that this would not be the end, for on the third day he would rise again.

The disciples, however, did not understand or maybe didn't want to understand what he was talking about. They liked things the way they were. Jesus was popular among the masses of people, and they, the disciples, were becoming well known as his associates. Some of his fame was rubbing off on them, and they liked it. They didn't want any changes. How could the people possibly turn against Jesus? Thus it was difficult for them to hear anything contrary to what they wanted to believe.

We've had that experience. Someone tries to tell us something quite different from what we would like to believe, and because it's too painful to change our point of view, we make little effort to understand what is being said.

We act like we believe the old cliché, "What you don't know can't hurt you." Of course, if we really believed that, we would be in favor of closing all schools and stopping all educational programs on the premise that the more one knows, the more one can be hurt. Maybe that's what another old saying is based on, "Ignorance is bliss." But as someone remarked, "If ignorance is bliss, why are so many people unhappy?"

But back to the story from the Gospel of Mark. One way not to pay attention to what's being told us is to think and talk about something else. That's what the disciples did. When Jesus tried to tell them what was going to happen, they began to argue among themselves as to who was the greatest.

Who is the greatest? Who is number one? It all depends on the criteria we are using for making that judgment. We don't know what criteria the disciples were using that day. Maybe one was claiming, "I am the favorite of Jesus," or another was claiming, "Our teacher loves me more than the rest of you," or "I'll be in charge if and when our leader is no longer with us," or "I am a better speaker than the rest of you," or "I'm more spiritual."

And no doubt beneath the disciples' question was a deeper one. They were asking as individuals, "Am I a significant person?" "Do I have worth?" "Would anyone miss me if I were no longer here?"

Like us, the disciples had observed that in society at large, certain people are considered more valuable than others. Like us too, the disciples felt like losers at times — they wondered as we wonder, “Am I of any value to anyone?” “Does anyone appreciate me?” “How can I become of more value in the eyes of others, and in my own eyes?” “How can I raise my self-esteem?”

Some time ago, I heard a psychologist say, “The vast majority of young people between twelve and twenty that I have observed are bitterly disappointed with who they are and what they represent. In a world that worships superstars and miracle men and women, they look in the mirror for signs of greatness, seeing only a terminal case of acne.”

However, teenagers are not alone in this personal devaluation. Each period of life poses its own unique threats to self-esteem. For example, frequently as adults, we lose our sense of self-worth if we lose our job because we get a lot of significance from our work.

Then as we grow older and face retirement, again we can lose self-worth because the world around us values those who are productive.

I believe that much of our self-doubt, much of our worry about whether or not we are significant or have any value results from a false system we use in judging human worth, that of ourselves and others. It was the same in the case of the disciples of Jesus. They and we live in a society where not everyone is seen as worthy. Not everyone is accepted. Some people are considered more valuable than others.

What then are some of the ways our society gives value to people? How do we decide who’s the greatest, or who’s number one?

One way we judge people today is by how much money one makes or how much wealth one possesses. If we can say or think to ourselves, “I make more money than you,” then we go on to think that we are worth more than someone else who makes less. We confuse monetary worth with self-worth.
Now, this is not a sermon on wages or salaries. Certainly, businesses and other employers must make decisions on how much to pay someone depending on the market and depending on how a particular salary or wage plan is negotiated. The point I want to make here is that as far as the Christian faith is concerned, how much money one earns has nothing to do with human value. Just because one person is paid or earns $100,000 a year and someone else only $9,000 a year, or someone else several million dollars a year — all this has nothing to do with human worth.

It’s not an adequate way to judge human beings or to ascertain who’s number one or who’s the greatest.

Last week there were news stories about Patrick Ewing, the basketball player, who took a giant step toward becoming one of the richest in terms of a high salary. He ended months of negotiations with the New York Knicks, signing a contract that calls for a 1.7 million dollar paycheck in 1985 and up to 30 million over the next ten years. It makes him the highest-paid rookie in NBA history.

All this, however, has nothing to do with Mr. Ewing’s value as a human being. He has just as much self-worth before the contract was signed as after.

A second way we mistakenly value human beings in our culture is in terms of good looks or beauty, or physical attractiveness. Studies show, for example, that as we adults respond very differently to an unusually beautiful child than we do to a particularly unattractive one, and that difference in response can have a profound impact on a developing personality.
In so many subtle ways and in some not so subtle, we tend to evaluate human worth in terms of beauty. A number of years ago, a tragic incident occurred in Chicago when eight student nurses were viciously murdered. The following day, a news commentator was discussing the violent event on the radio, and he said, “The thing that makes this tragedy much worse is that all eight of these young women were so attractive.” He was implying that they were more valuable, had more human worth, because they were beautiful. If one accepts that assumption, then the opposite is also true; the murders would have been less tragic if homely young women had been killed.

We’ve heard the song, “A Pretty Girl is Like a Melody.” Then what is a not-so-pretty girl? Fortunately, the God that Jesus Christ revealed does not evaluate human worth in terms of how much money we make, or how much property we own, or how physically attractive we might be.

A third way our society gives value or significance to human beings is in terms of intelligence. Not long after examining a new baby’s eyes, ears, nose, and related appendages for imperfections, most new parents begin looking for signs of budding genius, and believe it or not, they often seem to find it. A child’s growth and development are so rapid during the first year of life that his or her awestruck parents watch their brilliant creation in amazement.

Only eight months ago, the child was completely helpless. Now look at her! She said “Mama” a full six weeks before the average child. And what an athlete she’s going to be — not only is she very intelligent, but she has physical abilities that are incredible.

I’m not downplaying beauty or intelligence, but with our over-emphasis on judging human beings according to these standards, we forget that all people are valuable and that all people need to be loved and accepted — all people have worth as human beings in God’s creation.

Love is not something we earn or deserve by being beautiful or intelligent.

Who then is number one? Who is the greatest as far as God is concerned? Jesus put it plainly to his disciples. When he learned they had been discussing among themselves who was the greatest, he called his disciples together for a meeting and told them, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.” God evaluates us quite differently from the way we look at ourselves and others.

According to the words of Jesus, you are the greatest, you are number one when you are a helper to others. You are the greatest, you are number one when you are not trying to be number one. You are number one when you put yourself last. As Jesus said in another place, “The first shall be last, and the last first.”

Then Jesus took a child and put that child in the midst of them; and taking the child in his arms, he said, “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me, but God who sent me.”

Why a child? Because a little child is vulnerable and in comparison to adults, helpless. It has been said that the final test of a society is what it does to children, how it treats children. Also,

by using a child as an illustration, Jesus meant to include all those persons among us who are small, weak, handicapped, vulnerable in any way. The greatest among us are those who watch out, take care of, and defend the children and the child-like among us — not only those in our own immediate families, but others as well.

So true greatness, according to God's standards and criteria, comes through service to others, particularly the helpless. That's what God cares about the most — how we treat other people. God does not judge us according to the amount of money we make, or how wealthy or how poor we are. God does not judge us according to our physical attractiveness or our intelligence, or our athletic ability, or our family background, or our ethnic origin, or the color of our skin, or how famous we are. Again, listen to the words of Jesus—"Whoever would be great among us, let that person become the servant of all."

Overall, every human being is significant in the eyes of God. Our ultimate worth comes from God, who made each one of us in God's image.

Some years ago, a friend of mine gave me a little card which I've always treasured. This morning, as you leave the worship service, I've asked the ushers to give each one of you such a card. It's small enough so that you can put it in your purse or billfold or in your pocket. It says simply, "I'm third." It's a reminder of Jesus' teaching that we are to put God first in our lives, others second, and I'm third. I hope you will take a copy of the card, or several of them. For to be number one means to be number three. Amen.