

October 20<sup>th</sup>, 2024

## Mark 10:35-45 “Who’s On First?”

Hi. My name is Jesse, and I was raised as an only child. It’s funny how in certain social situations this makes me a “weirdo.” Sort of like when I tell people that I don’t drink coffee. I get these strange, “why are you like this?” looks. Now, if you want to get technical, I *do* have a half-sister. She’s 11 years older than me, and she’s my dad’s daughter from his first marriage. I didn’t discover this until I was 15. Judy and I never lived under the same roof, so honestly our relationship is more like friends than siblings. Now, when I married a woman who is the youngest of five siblings, I had a lot to learn when it comes to the complexities of sibling relationships. Let me tell you about the first time I went to Montesano, Washington in 1986 to take part in the semi-annual Lunsford family reunion. I had already met Stuart and Cathie, her siblings that lived with her mom and stepdad in The Dalles, Oregon. But this event in Washington was the first time I ever met Mary’s biological father and her step siblings David and Diana. Of course, there was the usual awkward “Oh, so you’re the new boyfriend” moment that happens in this kind of setting. That didn’t bother me though. Everything was going great until all the siblings and their significant others sat down in the dining room to play table games. We played all sorts of that evening games -- Uno, Trivial Pursuit, and several variations of poker. The last game we played the at table was Pictionary. Now, for those of you who have never played Pictionary, it’s a board game similar to charades, but instead of acting out the words for other people to guess, you try to draw the word on a notepad. Mary and I already knew how to play this game. We played it quite a bit with friends in college. Heck, we may have been the ones who brought the game to the reunion in the first place. I can’t remember. So there we were having all sorts of good, clean family fun at the semi-annual Lunsford family reunion.

On the drive up to Montesano, Mary warned me about her family and indicated I might not “get” them. “Oh, really? Why?” Because I’m an only child. A weirdo. Well, I didn’t think there was anything unusual

about her family. They all seemed normal I guess. That is, until we started playing Pictionary. The rules are that you can only use drawings and symbols. You cannot speak or write words. You can only draw and use hand signals indicating, “keep going, you’re on the right track” or “cut that phrase in half.” Because we played so much in college and because Mary and I are both visually oriented, we were pretty good at this game, and we were winning. But her stepbrother, David and his wife, were a very close second. When it was our turn, Mary drew a card from the deck. The word was “pharmacy.” That’s a tough one, right? So she took her pencil and paper and drew what looked like a chalice. Holy grail? No. Disciples of Christ? No. That wasn’t it. Then she drew what looked like a little stick coming out of the top of the chalice. Okay, this isn’t a chalice. Is it a bowl of soup? Nope. Cereal? Nope. Then she drew what looked like the letter “R” on the chalice, but then she drew a line through the tail of that “R” which made it look like an “X.” The little egg timer was running out of sand – we didn’t have much time left. This was the play that would determine the winner of the game. I took one more guess – “pharmacy.” Woo-hoo! We won! Or *did* we? Her stepbrother, David, had a few things to say about the drawing. He said, “Wait a minute, you can’t draw letters.” Mary said, “It’s not a letter, it’s a symbol.” David said, “No, that’s clearly the letter ‘R.’” Mary said, “Sure, it *looks* like an ‘R.’ But that little line right there makes it a symbol.” David said, “No, that makes it an ‘X.’ You have two separate letters here. ‘R’ and ‘X.’ You might as well have written the word ‘pharmacy.’” She said, “But I didn’t. Pharmacy doesn’t have the letter ‘X’ in it does it?” I’m going to spare you the details of the fight that broke out, but I will say it was the indicator that game time was over. I was dumbfounded and thought, “Who the heck spends that amount of time, effort, and energy to build a case about something that trivial? Who the heck digs up examples from their early childhood to prove that one is either a cheater or a bully?” Siblings. That’s who. And *I’m* the weirdo. I’m glad I was able to bear witness to this, because it helped when we started our own family and had three boys. Their rivalry is a lot more passive than Mary and her siblings, but it’s just as brutal.

The Bible is filled with examples of sibling rivalries. Cain and Abel. Jacob and Esau. Rachel and Leah. Mary and Martha. Joseph and his 12 brothers. The example we have in today's scripture is an argument among the 12 disciples. You might say, "Yeah, but they weren't brothers." That's true, but there were two sets of brothers among them – James and John, Peter and Andrew. Don't think for a minute that they were innocent in this rapidly escalating argument. "Who among us will sit at the right hand of Jesus?" And this isn't the first time they had this argument. Back in chapter 9 they were arguing about who among them was the greatest. Who was Jesus' favorite. Imagine – the disciples were in the presence of Jesus who they believed was the Christ ... the Messiah of God Almighty. Ever since they met him, Jesus had been telling them about the mysteries of the reign of God. Many of his parables started out with the words, "The Kingdom of God is like ..."

He was giving his disciples a glimpse of the future that God had in store for the world. But instead of relishing his teaching and hanging on to his every word, they were completely fixated on their own agendas. They were competing for Jesus' attention like little kids. "Dad likes me best." "No, dad likes *me* best." Who among them would be Jesus' second in command in this kingdom he spoke of? This was sibling rivalry on a cosmic scale.

What do we often call each other in the church? "Brothers and sisters in Christ." We sing songs about being a family of God. Our former associate minister Katy Valentine used to challenge me on this verbiage. She'd say, "What if a person had a traumatic childhood?" I'd say, "That's when the church has the opportunity to model what a healthy family is supposed to be." But as we all know, even in the family of God there are sibling rivalries. Any time we get swept up into petty arguments over who is greatest and who is more worthy of attention, or whose opinions count more or who should or should not be in charge, we succumb to those divisions. Even the church is capable of being the source of trauma for many people. So yes, Katy was right. But I still stand by my assertion that we can be better, and we can provide a good example for what a healthy family looks like.

Whenever rivalries in the church happen, we miss out on the chance to see Jesus in his glory. We miss out on an opportunity for God to share something bold and exciting – a vision for the future and a hope for tomorrow. Every time we get caught up in ourselves, we miss the chance to hear God’s voice. Jesus’ words to his disciples, and I’m talking his disciples then *and* today is, “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be servant of all.” If you want to be truly great in God’s kingdom, it’s not about how many people are below you, it’s about how many people are above you. If you truly want the attention of our heavenly Parent, it’s not about how many people serve you, but about how many people you serve. If you want to be first, you’ve got to be last. It’s not about the glory you get, it’s about the glory God gets through you.

Well, okay, but that’s not the way it works in this world! Yeah, and I’m not going to argue with you there. But remember, that’s what this whole series is about. We’ve been talking about the many ways that the Kingdom of God is different than the world’s kingdoms. In fact, it’s completely upside down and opposite from the empires of the world. To get ahead in the world’s kingdoms, you’ve got to “strike first and show no mercy.” In the kingdoms of the world, greed is good. You’ve *got* to be a cheater and a bully ... not just to win Pictionary, but to win “the big game of life” too! There’s no room for deference. Compromise is weakness. The rulers of Earth’s kingdoms work hard to take others’ freedom away while convincing them that they, as the benevolent ruler, are the only ones who can lead them to “freedom.” The fruits of Caesar’s rule – the markers of Caesar’s legacy -- the results of his actions are anger, jealousy, strife, division, impurity, indecency, and idolatry. Sounds like sibling rivalry at its worst. But remember, the Kingdom of God is the upside of this. It is the other side of the coin. The fruits of God’s rule are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. As the Apostle Paul says in the book of Galatians, “Of these things there is no law.”

Sibling rivalries occur when spiritual brothers and sisters fail to recognize that there is plenty of God's love and attention to go around. When we fail to see this, we scramble around desperately trying to replace that sense of God's love with things that are temporary. Once again, it's about having an attitude of abundance rather than an attitude of scarcity. We end up trying to convince each other that there is a hierarchy of God's love in the church. But there is enough love to go around. There is enough resources to go around. There is enough time to live a full and fruitful life. But most of the time, we are victims of our own folly. When we grasp, hoard, compete and fight, everyone loses. When we serve each other, we help usher God's kingdom to earth. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.