

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**  
**SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**  
**REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON**  
**September 20, 2009**  
**“WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE NUMBER ONE?”**  
**Mark 9:30-37**  
**11:00 A.M. SERVICE**

Vince Lombardi once said, **“Winning isn’t everything, it’s the only thing.”** Of course, Lombardi complained he was misquoted, but there are people who believe that winning is the only thing that matters.

Joe Jacobi of the Washington Redskins once said, **“I’d run over my own mother to win the Super Bowl.”**

Hearing Jacobi’s boast, Matt Millen of the Oakland Raiders said: **“To win, I’d run over Joe’s Mom, too.”**

There are many people today who would divide the world into two groups, the winners and the losers. And for them, it doesn’t matter how many people you have to step on, the only thing that matters is to win.

Jesus and his disciples were on their way to Capernaum. As they entered the house where they would be staying, he asked his disciples, **“*What were you arguing about on the road?*”** According to Mark’s Gospel, they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was number one among them.

So, the disciples were human just like you and I are human. Who doesn’t want to stand out? Some of the greatest people who have ever lived were also among the most ambitious.

It is said that Michelangelo prayed: **“Lord, grant that I may always**

**desire more than I can accomplish.”**

Abraham Lincoln often said to himself as a boy studying by the pine log fire at night: **“I will study and get ready and perhaps my chance will come.”** And, indeed, it did come.

Having the first African-American president reminds us of other people of color who have succeeded against even greater odds. They, too, were driven to succeed.

Who can help but be impressed by the accomplishments of one such George Washington Carver? Carver was born to slave mother. He never knew his father. But he wanted to make a difference in the world, and he did! He became one of the greatest scientists in American history.

The disciples were human beings. They wanted their names to be in lights just as you and I want to stand out from our peers. There is nothing wrong with that as long it does not cause us to mistreat others or betray our values. My guess is Jesus wanted them to be ambitious because ambitious people get things done. He just wanted them to be ambitious in the right way.

Sitting down, Jesus called the all twelve disciples together and said to them, ***“If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.”***

Think about those words for a moment. If you want to be the greatest, you must learn to serve others. What does it mean to be a servant? **Service is not an ambition that most of us aspire to.** We would prefer to look after number one rather than being a servant.

Some of you will remember a famous experiment that was performed at the Princeton Theological Seminary years ago. Twenty theological students at Princeton, future ministers of the Gospel, were instructed to go to a recording studio and make a tape recording of their interpretation of the

story of the Good Samaritan.

Twenty theological students in a second group were told to go to the same recording studio. However they were simply told that they were participating in a career study program. They were to give a talk on their future career and their idea of ministry.

Unknown to the students, a professional actor had been hired to stage an act for them as they walked along the route from the dormitory to the recording studio. As the students passed by this actor, he clutched his heart and gasped, "Oh, this is a big one!" With that, he toppled over. Amazingly, sixty percent of these theological students did not stop. They trudged right on to keep their appointments with the tape recorder.

An article reporting on this study published in the magazine *Human Behavior*, carried this notation: **"Some who were planning their dissertation on the Good Samaritan literally stepped over the slumped body as they hurried along."**

Imagine that! Giving a dissertation on the Good Samaritan and stepping over the prone body of an unfortunate person. Not much of a servant mentality there.

There was a story a number of years ago that was carried in the newspapers and in TIME magazine. A plane crashed on a runway in Philadelphia and caught on fire. At the door an attractive twenty-four-year-old flight attendant, Mary Housley, took her place to help the passengers to the ground. As soon as she had finished getting all of the passengers to safety Housley also started to jump from the plane. But just before she made her escape, a passenger on the ground screamed, **"My baby, my baby!"** Somehow this passenger had left her baby behind on the plane. Flight attendant Mary Housley turned back into the plane to find the baby, and that was the last time anyone saw her alive. When the debris cooled they found

Mary Housley's body over the 4-month-old baby she tried to rescue.

TIME magazine captioned her picture with these words, "**She could have jumped.**"

There are still heroes in the world. There are still people who sacrifice themselves for others and we are thankful for it. May we never forget what Christ meant when he said that we are to be a servant of all.

**Service is the key to successful living.** Service is also the key to success in business. Service is actually the key to becoming the greatest.

The people we honor are those who best serve the community. That's one of the reasons we go to funerals. We want to pay our last respect to those who have served. In serving others, we touch many, many lives. The key to a successful life is service.

And that of course, is also true of the church. That's what rethink church is about. The most attractive thing we can do as a church is to serve our community. The extent to which we serve our community is the extent to which we have become a great church. As soon as the pumpkins arrive outside, you will see the evidence of the commitment we make to the ministry of our children and young people.

I am thankful that we are a church that takes care of the needs of its people, even our children; especially our children. We should never have any problem finding people to work with our boys and girls, with our young people. We should never have any trouble finding people to work with any part of the church's ministry--with shut-ins, with singles and young adults. We are a servant people, and if we are to be a great church, we must discover people's needs and meet those needs.

Isn't it interesting that when Jesus said that we must be servant of all, he took a child and set him in the midst of them? And when he had taken him

in his arms, he said unto them, ***“Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.”*** If we are going to be a great church, we must be a church that serves boys and girls and young people and aging persons, and the entire church family, as well as the community outside. Service is the key to greatness. That’s what it means to be number one. If you want to be number one, I would love to be your pastor.