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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
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Lectionary Year B: Mark 9:30-37

Back in the Golden Age of Tabloid Television, viewers got glimpses into the high-rent, jet-set world through a program called Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous. No one of my generation or older can forget the peculiarly-accented Robin Leach taking us to all varieties of lavish hot spots around the world. For the ninety-nine percent of us who didn't live among the luxuries of half-million-dollar cars and multimillion-dollar homes, the program attracted curiosity but also subtly reminded viewers that, as far as their chances of living those "lifestyles" was concerned, this half-hour syndicated TV show was about as close as they'd ever get.

But did Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous effect a change in attitudes in American culture? Did everyone -- including you and me -- eventually want a piece of the extravagance? Yes. Two things prove that point -- the Great Recession of 2008 and 2009, in which a whole lot of people faced the consequences of buying things (houses, for example) that they couldn't afford. But is this really anything new? No. A glimpse into virtually every sector of business and industry will show you this, and it goes without saying that advertising and marketing exert tremendous influence on people's habits and expectations.

Let's take an industry that won't be too much of a stretch for me -- the automotive industry. Alfred P. Sloan, longtime CEO of General Motors, proposed that GM ought to provide "a car for every purse and purpose," whereby the company provided a product for those of modest means (a Chevrolet) as well as a product for the elite (a Cadillac) -- and everything in between.

The real genius in this approach is that customers of more modest means always had something they could aspire to. By the time I got interested in cars as a young kid, GM could've had me covered indefinitely. I'd start out with a Chevy, but then, when the Chevy got tired and I had a few more bucks in my pocket, I could move up to a Pontiac. And when the Pontiac got tired and I'd clinched a nice promotion at work, I could move up to an Oldsmobile -- maybe a nicely-equipped Ninety Eight. Onward and upward I'd go from Oldsmobile to Buick, and finally, to Cadillac. Alas, the lives of both GM and yours truly didn't continue on that course, but vestiges of Alfred P. Sloan's vision still remain. You'll notice that your average small-town GM dealership still pairs Chevrolet with a costlier make, again to (in theory) give the customer something to aspire to...as well as providing the dealer with a more profitable product.

As for our friend Robin Leach -- well, he was a big believer in aspiration, going so far as to say, "Nobody would watch Lifestyles of the Poor and Unknown." Given the explosion of "reality TV" over the last couple decades, however, viewers will find that,

with the turn of a channel, their trip to the bottom rungs of the socioeconomic ladder can be pretty fast. I never thought I'd hear myself say this, but at least the materialism that Robin Leach showcased on Lifestyles raised people's aspirations -- good or bad, and no one was exploited in the process. The same can't be said of a lot of "reality TV" offerings today...

But, never fear, the TV business still knows that you want to see people who live in unbridled opulence. so, after church, you can go home and fire up the DVR and watch The Real Housewives of [Wherever] to your heart's content!

That said, it would be really interesting to hear Jesus' take on contemporary culture. After all, who would aspire to be, as Robin Leach put it, "poor and unknown"? But Jesus, as evidenced in today's Gospel text, takes this enormous blimp of human aspiration and, well, deflates it! When the disciples were bickering among themselves as to "who was the greatest," Jesus turns the matter on its head and says, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all" (Mark 9:34, 35).

Now, of course, times have changed so much since Jesus said this; we have people today who are good servants and great philanthropists and yet have considerable personal wealth. It is not uncommon to see successful, well-to-do professionals doing volunteer work among society's lowliest...and doing so unflinchingly. But in Jesus' time, those who aspired to greatness would've suffered

grave damage to their reputations had they been seen associating with the "wrong" people.

Sure, this can still happen today, but with nowhere near that level of impact.

Jesus, being fully conscious of how much people are judged by the company they keep, applies this rule to the way his disciples ought to live. He says be seen with children. Be seen with people who are powerless. Be seen with people who are "poor and unknown." This is why he takes a child in his arms and says, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me..." (Mark 9:37a). Jesus is the example of humility and servanthood who upsets the norm of his times that made one's company the measure of one's character. What everyone thought was the correct thing to do -- "be seen with the 'right' people" -- was actually the incorrect thing to do. To that effect, Jesus asks, "How about being seen with the 'wrong' people?" Heck, even if you drive a Cadillac, you should be hanging out with the Chevy crowd!

But, throughout much of the Midwest, this is still possible.

"Mixed-income" neighborhoods still exist, although they aren't as plentiful as they once were. Millionaires can still say hello to people who live below the poverty line. And yes, Cadillacs can still be seen next to Chevys in parking lots. One very chilling consequence of human aspiration, though, is evident in the burgeoning "Real Housewives" lifestyle -- an entire generation of

people will live and die completely isolated from anyone less wealthy and less privileged than they are. Now, you might think, "So what...that ship has already sailed," to which Jesus would say, "I'll tell you what!"

Jesus would say that you've missed the point. Humanity doesn't need a bunch of people who are so completely isolated from poverty and disadvantage that they don't even realize they're "there," much less responsive to their needs. That's human aspiration run amok. You've spent so much of your life striving upward that you've never looked down. Now, you've finally locked yourself away so that you'll never have to see or even think about the day-to-day reality of the poor and unknown masses who live and die without fame, stature, or dignity.

Jesus has a problem with that.

Jesus is telling us that if we want to make it to the top, we'd better head for the bottom. Aspire not to be the greatest master in the world, but instead the greatest servant. Jesus is looking for some extraordinary folks with ordinary hearts beating inside them. Fortunately, I grew up with an example of that -- my Dad. I grew up in a "mixed-income" neighborhood long before urban planners came up with the idea. I saw my Dad drive a scruffy '75 Dodge pickup to work and change oil in the driveway. The sad thing is that no one with Dad's education and employment would live like that today. Image has taken the place of substance.

How things "look" is more important than who you really are.

Jesus has a problem with that.

We maybe watched a few too many episodes of Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous back in the Eighties. We learned to chase after material things instead of seeking integrity. We aspired to own a Cadillac and forgot about all those who still drove Chevys. We neglected the call of our Lord to live among the poor and unknown and to give them the respect and dignity that every human being deserves!

Jesus has a problem with that.

But Jesus doesn't have a problem with people who don't mind getting their hands dirty and doing the work of a servant. Jesus doesn't have a problem with people unashamed of keeping company with the "wrong" crowd. And Jesus doesn't have a problem with extraordinary people who have ordinary hearts beating inside them. If anything, Jesus is acutely aware of human desires for power, prestige, fame, and riches...and he sees the need for humans to be knocked down a few notches. Sometimes that's necessary.

It's necessary because as long as we're on this side of eternal life, there will be people who cannot help themselves. There will be poor people, there will be old people, and, as Jesus reminds us today, there will be children. And, if anything, Jesus reminds us that, of all the people in the world, these are the ones to whom we should devote the most time and effort! Should anyone attempt

to tell you that there is no "social gospel," simply ask the person, "Then what is there...a private gospel?" Jesus' teaching is the least egocentric teaching out there; he's constantly reminding us that there's more than you out there. There's your neighbor. There are people you have to look out for. There are people with less power and privilege than you. These are the ones who deserve more attention than you!

Jesus makes improvement possible because he shows us the way and gives us the vision. When I hear all the pessimism about how bad the world is getting, I ask those pessimists, "How are you helping to change things for the better?" You see, it's quite easy to claim to be a Christian and to think that your Christianity will keep you above the fray...and just a little bit better than everyone else. But actually, Christianity calls you into the fray...to love and to serve and to give. That's the sort of stuff that'll make the world more humane and more livable. And as long as Jesus gives us this hope, he will guide us in humility and servanthood. He, through our response to the needs around us, will ensure that the poor and unknown know respect and dignity. He will help us bring a bit of heaven to this troubled earth.

And that starts with people like you and me making it to the top by heading for the bottom. Robin Leach wouldn't approve of the idea, but Jesus would.

Amen.