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Undercover Boss: The Rat Race

Mark 9:33-41

I want to start by welcoming our "Great Worker" guests this morning. You were nominated by a member of this congregation as a "Great Worker" and we are blessed to be able to honor you today. Thanks for making Gig Harbor a better place to live by the way you work! We appreciate you!

I also have a wonderful piece of church family news. After a nation-wide search, our elders have extended a unanimous call to Dr. Bill MacDonald to serve as our new Pastor of Renewal. You saw more details about the MacDonalds in my blog. They will be joining our team in August. Bill has a great heart for the whole church, a passion for Celebrate Recovery... and he is a classical guitarist. How can you do better than that? I think you will love them; we already do. Many thanks to Rosemary Lukens, Bob Beilke and their search team. I've told the MacDonalds what a sweetheart church you are, and I know you will welcome them warmly. And if anyone has a mother-in-law unit that they could share for a few months as they get established, we would love to hear from you.

In 1985 I had the opportunity to visit Berlin, Germany when the wall was still up. That wall was a horrible emblem of oppression and when I went into East Berlin and spoke with believers there, I was struck by how wrong that wall was; how wrong it was to put an artificial barrier between two worlds that belonged together. The impact of the wall was an evil and destructive division that brought harm and heartache to the people on both sides.

There is a sense in which the Church has erected such a wall in the lives of its people; a wall between faith and work, between Sunday and Monday. Like the Berlin wall, it is a barrier that impoverishes both sides. On one side is the world of work that is deprived of the spiritual influences that keep it from becoming idolatrous. And on the other side is a church that fails to speak life and blessing into this huge part of its peoples' lives... and neglects the incredible gifts they could bring to the work of the kingdom.

For the last several weeks, we have been trying to tear that wall down. We've discovered that our work is a gift from God. We've been reminded that our work can be a place where we stand as a witness for Christ in word and deed. And we've faced the pain people experience when they are unable to work. As Pope Francis

tweeted this last week—dang it, even the pope is a tweeter! I'm so lame—"How I wish everyone had decent work! It is essential for human dignity."

Work was created by God to be good... work should be good. But work isn't always good; in fact, work can become idolatrous. We even have a term for that idolatry: workaholism. When we reach the point where we worship our work—where it becomes the most important thing in our life, or when we allow it to become a tyrant that controls our life—we feel very much like these guys, don't we? [*Rats running in a wheel*] This morning I'd like to look at three things that cause us to feel like a rat in a race: Comparison, Consumption and Chaos. And if our text sounds familiar, it should. It comes from the same section of Mark's gospel we've been in for two weeks. Listen to Jesus's private words to his disciples. [*Mark 9:31-41*]

"...Jesus said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise." But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it. They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?" But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all." He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to 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."

Do you know what two of the biggest sources of conflict are in the workplace? Offices and parking spaces. One office may be no different than another, one parking place no farther than another... but they can be a source of incredible inter-office conflict. Why? Comparison. It's not about how nice my office is; it's about how close my office is to the place of power. Who is closer than me to the boss? Who is farther than me? And it's not about how close my assigned parking place is... it's whether it's closer than Fred's parking place. One of the most toxic aspects of the rat race is comparison. It corrupts every workplace because, behind seemingly silly issues about whose office is where, whose parking space is where, whose title is what...lies the VERY real and very emotional issue of worth. And it's not, "Am I important..." but rather, "Am I more important than Fred or Sally or Joe... or who's it..."

We see this in our story, don't we? The disciples, trailing behind Jesus on the road, are in a heated conversation. What could they be talking about with such passion? Jesus' last sermon? His last incredible miracle? Nope. They are arguing about who is the greatest. "I'm clearly the most important," says Peter. "Jesus named me 'Rocky.'" "I'm the most important," says John. "Jesus loves me most." Remember when James and John had the audacity to ask Jesus about being seated on his right

and left hand? Peter was nowhere to be found in that conversation. Why? Because that conversation took place after this conversation on the road. Apparently, after this argument, James and John felt threatened by Peter and wanted to secure their place with Jesus. They wanted to be more important, more powerful than Peter or any other disciple for that matter. Comparison.

I think this is one of the most embarrassing stories in the Bible. Jesus asks, "Hey guys... what were you talking about back there on the road?" (As if he didn't know!) "Oh... nothing... nothing important. Say, how about that hummus tonight... wasn't it delicious?" And what makes this conversation even more excruciating is this: Just before their argument, Jesus was warning them about his impending death. "Guys... I just want you to know that within a few days, I will be arrested and crucified." "Yeah, whatever Jesus... Peter, you think you are such a big shot!" This is breathtakingly insensitive... and all because of the poison of comparison. It starts on the playground. "I'm tougher than you are. I'm smarter than you are. My dad can beat up your dad. My mom can beat up your mom." And it carries right into adulthood and the workplace.

So what is the antidote for the toxin of Comparison? How do we avoid getting into a bidding war over our relative worth? Answer: Move yourself to the end of the line. Don't look for ways to be better than the other; assume you are lesser. Steal the opportunity for someone to push in front of you. Give that spot to them. Jesus' formula for career advancement in the kingdom is simple: You want to be first? Make yourself last. And he illustrates it in a way that, at the time, would have been considered inappropriate. He reaches down, sweeps a little kid into his arms and says, "Make it your point in life to welcome little children. When you do, you are welcoming me and God."

We say, "Ahh, isn't that precious. Jesus is nice to little kids." But at that time, children were considered nothing more than adults in the making. They were an irritation for the women to deal with until they were old enough to be productive. Men didn't have the time for such foolishness... and especially not rabbis. It was undignified for him to play with kids. Why? Because they were nothings in society... nobodies... unimportant. Yet to the men who were just arguing about who was most important, Jesus says, "I want you to behave like you are least important. Don't act like a somebody. Act like a nobody... and treat the nobodies like they are somebodies."

I'm not saying you should have an unrealistically critical view of yourself. The antidote to Comparison is not self-loathing... it is confidence! Not comparison... but confidence! Having the confidence that God loves you, that you're precious and valued in His eyes, that He has gifted you to do the work that only you can do! A healthy dose of Holy Spirit-confidence is the greatest corrective to the poison of Comparison. When you are confident in Christ—in who He made you to be, in what he has called you to do—you can surrender the need to be better than others and take the last place in line.

Here's a second toxin in the rat race: Consumption. One of the blessings of work is that it allows us to buy and enjoy wonderful things in life. It is fulfilling to work hard, save money, buy a house, pay for that college education or treat yourself to a toy... as long as you aren't maxing out the credit card to do it! (Right, FPU grads?) And when we work hard and are recognized for our work and promoted, one of the benefits is more pay and the ability to buy more things.

But that can become an addiction. Especially in beautiful, perfect Gig Harbor—and apparently in Galilee, too. Listen to this story from Luke 12:

And Jesus told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.' "Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry."'" "But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?' "This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God."

If this doesn't speak to our Gig Harbor lifestyle, I don't know what does. How often have I driven by what seemed like a perfectly good house that was being torn down to be replaced by a humongous house that dwarfs the lot? For so many of us, there is never a point where we utter that rarely used English word: enough! I have enough. I have enough. Instead, the motto of our culture is more! Whatever I have, I want more. However big my house might be, I want it bigger. However nice my car, I want it nicer. However long my boat, I want it longer. And our job feeds that monster of consumption. Even with good salaries—even with raises—we don't save, we don't give... we spend, spend, spend because we worship the God of consumption.

So what is the gospel alternative? Contentment. Reaching the point where we can say, with all sincerity, "I have enough. I don't need one thing more." Paul once wrote, "...I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation..." Are you content? If you never got one more thing, could you be happy?

So, the rat race is a tension between comparison and confidence... between consumption and contentment. Here's one more poison in the rat race: Chaos. Much of today's workplace runs at a crazy, high-paced tempo that wears people down. Early mornings, late nights, skipped days off, skipped vacations or vacations spoiled because dad is on his cell phone the whole time. I'll confess... this can sometimes be the pace here at Chapel Hill. We hurry and rush here... a lot. And I am the chief rusher!

But when we look to Jesus, we discover someone who knew how to work... and knew how to rest! He was never rushed. He took his time. I love this story from Mark 1:

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: "Everyone is looking for you!" (35-37)

Don't you just love this? Only one chapter into the gospel and the disciples are already bossing Jesus around. What is he doing starting his day quietly with the Father when there are so many demons to be cast out and lepers to be healed! He has work to do! Enough of this resting!

But Jesus would not be rushed. He never hurried. When news came that his friend Lazarus was sick, Jesus delayed so long that Lazarus died. When Jairus tried to hurry Jesus to his sick daughter, he paused to heal a woman who was hemorrhaging. And Jairus' daughter died. Of course, in both cases, Jesus raised them back to life again. He was in control all along... at his pace! Again and again, we see Jesus refusing to be drawn into the frantic chaos of his surroundings. He set a tempo for life that allowed time for every important relationship and ensured his own good health.

The gospel counter to Chaos is Cadence—a rhythm, a tempo to your life. It is the ability to say, "No, I will not make one more phone call and miss dinner. No, I will not schedule a meeting at the same time as my kid's game. No, I will not work on my Sabbath." Some of you are driven this hard by a mean boss. That's tough. But most of you who have no cadence to your life—who are rushed and harried—it is your own darned fault. That is your calendar and you are the one filling it up the way you do.

Tomorrow, Cyndi and I leave for Sabbatical for two months. This is a gift given to me by this church and every seven years, I have been blessed by it. Believe me, I realize what a treasure it is, and I do not take it lightly. But these last three years have been tiring and I am looking forward to the chance to rest and read and pray and think. This will bless me and restore me, and in this summer when Cyndi and I celebrate our 25th anniversary, it will bless our marriage, too. But understand this: I believe it blesses the church as well. I come back from these sabbaticals ready to rock and roll. When colleagues ask me how I've lasted 27 years in one church, this is part of the answer: you have urged me to find a cadence to my life and ministry that is sustainable. And I am very grateful. Thank you!

Comparison or Confidence. Consumption or Contentment. Chaos or Cadence. How does this speak to you in your own work life? Do you feel the need to compare yourself to others, or are you confident enough in who you are in Christ to give up first place and move to the end of the line? Do you find yourself consuming more

and more, or have you reached a place of contentment where you can say, "Enough. I have enough." Are you working at a frantic pace or are you willing to find a cadence that gives you life and gives life to those around you?

It has been a blessing to hear how God is transforming your view of work. Some of you have prayed for change in your attitude or your behavior. Others have sensed a more radical call. Up! Bob and Machel Beilke are obeying a call of God to a very unusual place. Qatar, a nation the size of King and Snohomish county that sits on the Persian Gulf! In a nation that typically segregates its Special Ed children, Machel has accepted an invitation to open a model inclusion school. As she puts it, she hopes to "provide education for all children, embrace a new culture, and be faithful to God's call upon our lives." This is a huge step of faith, especially for Bob because he is leaving a job he loves as a child psychologist and has not yet found employment in Qatar.

You don't have to go to Qatar to escape the rat race, but if you don't view your work as God's call and gift you may easily end up like these guys. [*Rats running in a wheel*] So I want to pray for us all right now that the Holy Spirit will do in us what we cannot do.

Sermon Questions

- REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER: Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
- PRAY TOGETHER: Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.
- DIG DEEPER
 1. This morning's text contains a stark contrast. What is it? What does this stir as you think about your own Christian discipleship?
 2. In what ways is competition good in the business world? When does it get destructive?
 3. Have you ever struggled with playing the "comparison game?" How does this text speak to that?