

The march to the collegiate football championship began this weekend.

All season long we will have the polls, opinions, educated opinions if they agree with you, and then those not-so-educated opinions, on just who the number one team is.

But they have to play the game, and in eighteen weeks two teams will be playing for the championship.

Every week from now to then, we will analyze and scrutinize, evaluate and calculate, and just talk and talk about who will do what, this team, that team, our team, but until the game is played, it's all opinion.

And let's be very honest about it. When the playoffs begin, some of us will still be arguing that there's no way a particular team or two should be there.

But that night in January, polls and opinions matter not, we will see who comes out on top!

In our story in Mark's gospel, Jesus has taken his own poll: Who do people say that I am?"

And he receives a variety of answers, educated opinions. Even Peter gives his opinion, "You're number one, the Messiah!"

I read Peter's answer as his educated opinion because he hasn't seen what it looks like for Jesus to get to the top.

And when Jesus says that suffering and death and rejection and resurrection is what it's going to look like when he gets to the top; that outcome doesn't fit Peter's analysis, or for that matter, anybody's idea of the Messiah.

Jesus is saying this is what it will be like for me as Messiah, and Peter can't see it that way, "No way. I won't let it happen."

Jesus tells Peter he's thinking of human things rather than divine things.

Peter says, "Jesus, when you get to the top as Messiah, I see you as the power and authority of God. That is thinking about divine things."

Jesus says, "Peter, you're spectating; I'm down on the field. To get to the top as Messiah is the way of suffering and dying; the way, the truth, the life I've been given that is foolishness to the world.

You don't see it that way because you're looking at the power rankings. But God sees it that way."

Then Jesus hammers the point home, "Get behind me, Satan." Literally, it is 'depart behind me.'

Just the opposite of what Jesus said to Peter when he called him to discipleship, "Follow me," or literally, "Come behind me."

He uses the same language in the invitation in our scripture lesson when he talks to all would-be disciples, "If any want become my followers, to follow behind me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Come behind me.

Jesus has redirected the question from his lordship, "Who do you say that I am?", and thrown it back to our discipleship, "When you get to the top of the world, whose side are you on?"

Eugene Peterson translates it, "Get everything you want and find that you have lost you. What have you profited? What have you given for yourself if that happens?"

Not who Jesus is, but who you are: When you get to the top, what does God see?

No more talk, no more educated opinions. It's plain for all the world to see.

Jesus cuts right to the heart of it in terms of our values and our commitment: when you get to the top, what does God see?

When you get to the top, what is seen about your values? Gain the whole world and lose yourself. What's the profit?

Jesus is talking about your bottom line, as he said another time, "Where your treasure is, there your heart is also."

Let me tell you a story. A successful businessman was growing old and knew it was time to choose a successor to take over the business.

He called the six young executives in his company together.

He said "It is time for me to step down and choose the next CEO. I have decided to choose one of you. I am going to give each one of you a seed today. I want you to plant the seed, water it, and come back here one year from today with what you have grown from this seed. I will then judge the plants that you bring to choose who will lead my company."

Jim, one of the executives, went home and excitedly told his wife the story. Together they got the pot, fertilizer, and soil to plant the seed. Every day, he watered it and watched it closely to see the progress.

As the months went by the other executives were bragging how well their seeds were growing. But nothing was happening with Jim's pot, just dirt.

The year was up, and it was time for everyone to bring their plants into the office for the CEO to inspect them.

Jim told his wife how embarrassed he was to bring in an empty pot to the office, but she encouraged him to be honest.

When the CEO arrived, he surveyed the room and greeted his young executives. Then he asked Jim to come up.

The boss asked Jim what happened to his seed and Jim told the story of how he nurtured and cared for the seed, but it never grew.

The CEO then asked everyone to be seated except Jim as he announced, "I would like to introduce you all to your new Chief Executive Officer."

He continued, "One year ago, I gave everyone in this room a seed. What you did not know was that each seed had been boiled and was a dead seed. It was absolutely impossible for any of them to grow."

Jim was the only one in this room with the courage and honesty to bring me a pot with my seed in it. He did not substitute it with another seed like the rest of you did. Therefore, he has shown courage, honesty and integrity and I know he will run this company with conscience."

Jesus is asking those who would follow him, who would carry on his work, "Why do you do what you do? When you get to the top of the world, what are you about? What values have gotten you there?"

Then Jesus asks, "When you get to the top, what is seen about your commitment?"

Jesus says, "Deny yourself, take up your cross, follow me, even to the point of death."

Let me tell you another story.

In 1972, a terrible earthquake struck near Managua, Nicaragua.

Immediately following the earthquake, there were two dramatic responses by two men to the tragedy, the suffering, the overwhelming loss throughout the countryside and city.

One of the men was Howard Hughes, at the time one of the wealthiest men in the world. He was in a hotel in Managua, had rented the top two floors.

After the earthquake, he somehow made his way through the rubble and wreckage to the airport and his private jet and flew out of Nicaragua to a luxury resort in Europe.

The other man was named Roberto Clemente, at the time a superstar right fielder for the Pittsburgh Pirates baseball team.

When he heard of the earthquake, he began to charter some cargo planes and started flying into the devastated area with medicine, food, and other supplies that were so desperately needed.

On one of the trips, the plane he was on went down into the open sea and Roberto Clemente was killed.

One man was a taker; he thought only of himself. He walked by the suffering and left town!

The other man was a giver, thinking only of others. Who really died, who really lived that day?

Howard Hughes, who would string out his life, hiding away from the world, freaked out on drugs, and whose immense wealth served only him, but could not save him?

Or a baseball player who felt he needed to give back to people like himself and gave his life doing it?

It seems to me that these two responses to the same event raise the question of our commitment to a simple equation: In light of the needs of this world, in light of our need for Christ, will we be content to fly in or fly out?

That's the choice.

Now let's put ourselves back there with Peter and all the would-be disciples to whom Jesus is talking.

We know the answer to the first question: Who do you say that I am?

We know the fact of suffering and death and resurrection. We have accepted his lordship.

But still we must answer the question Jesus directs to us about our discipleship: Will we follow behind him?

Will we move from 'success' as a measure of life to 'significance' as why we do what we do?

Instead of 'making more' as a guideline for our life, will 'making a difference' become the daily goal of what we do each day?

When you get to the top, what does God see?

Or better yet, whom does God see? Jesus leading you all the way...

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.