

THE GREATEST IN THE KINGDOM

Mark 9:30-37

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 20, Series B)

September 19, 2021

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The gospel lesson for the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost comes from *The Gospel According to Mark*, chapter 9, verses 30 through 37. In this gospel lesson, Jesus teaches his disciples what is most important. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Mark 9, beginning at verse 30, we read in Jesus' name.

³⁰ They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, ³¹ for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, **“The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise.”** ³² But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him.

³³ And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, **“What were you discussing on the way?”** ³⁴ But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. ³⁵ And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, **“If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.”**

³⁶ And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ **“Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.”**

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Who wants to be the greatest? You might be wondering, *The greatest what? The greatest golfer? The greatest quilter? The greatest parent? The greatest investor?* No. More important than all those. In this passage, Jesus teaches us what it takes to be the greatest. Period. This sounds like something we should pay attention to.

Jesus is on a journey with his disciples. He has set his face toward the cross. As readers of the Bible, we don't always notice that Jesus is on a journey. Part of the problem is that, usually, we only read a little bit at a time. The other part of the problem is that we might not know the geography of Israel. When Mark says that Jesus went to Caesarea Philippi (8:27), then Capernaum (9:33), then the region beyond the Jordan (10:1), then Jericho (10:46), then Bethany (11:1), and finally Jerusalem (11:15), how many of us know where all those places are? Probably not many of us. And that's understandable, because most of us have never been there. But every location Mark mentions is a little bit closer to Jerusalem and the cross the Father was preparing for Jesus. Chapters 8 through 11 are the journey section of Mark. It's kind of like in *The Lord of the Rings*, where Frodo and Sam are on a journey to Mordor. And as they get closer, Sam learns more about why Frodo is going there, and he doesn't like it. That's what's going on here with Jesus and his disciples. They're on the way to Jerusalem, and Jesus is teaching his disciples why he's going there, but they don't like it.

This scene in the journey takes place in and around Capernaum. Capernaum was Jesus' hometown. This was the last time he would be there before his death. And Jesus was well-known here, but he avoids being noticed. Sometimes we don't know exactly why Jesus does this, but in this case we do. He wants to teach his disciples without being interrupted.

And this is interesting. If the people hear that Jesus is home, what are they going to do? They're going to bring all the sick people to him for healing. And Jesus doesn't want to be distracted with that. Now that sounds a bit cold. What could be more important than healing the sick? In this case: Bible class. It seems that we don't value Bible class as highly as Jesus does. Jesus has something important to teach his disciples. It is the most important thing. Jesus was teaching them, "**The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise.**" (9:31). Throughout this journey, Jesus was continually teaching them that he must go to the cross. This is the second of three instances Mark records where Jesus predicts his death and resurrection (8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34). And the way Mark records it, we get the impression that Jesus was going on and on about this for the entire journey. But they did not understand.

And that's kind of funny, because, what is there to get? It's not like the parables, where the meaning of Jesus' words were often hidden in stories. The words are very plain and matter-of-fact. "**The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise.**" What does this mean? It means exactly what Jesus says. But they don't get it, because they can't believe Jesus really intends to die. The words are plain enough, but the plan makes no sense.

It would be like ... suppose you work at a store. And the owner says to you, "Don't charge the customers for products anymore. Whatever they want, they can have it for free. And we're going to do this forever." The words are perfectly understandable, but you might be confused, because that doesn't sound like a profitable business plan. You would think, *Obviously, we can't do this forever, because we would lose money. Then the store would go out of business, and I would lose my job.* So you might wonder if you should really follow the owner's instructions.

That's the kind of confusion the disciples were experiencing. They understood the plain meaning of Jesus' words. And that, for them, was the problem. We've noted before that Jesus' teaching is kind of odd this way. When he spoke in parables, people did not understand, and they were willing to put up with that. But when he spoke clearly, that's when they were really put off.

The disciples did not understand Jesus' plan of being crucified and rising again after three days. It's not how they would have drawn it up. It's not how anyone would have drawn it up.

Jesus is supposed to be the king they've been waiting for. He is supposed to be the one to restore the fortunes of Israel. Everything the disciples had been doing with Jesus for the last three years is for this very purpose—so that they might reign with him in his kingdom when he assumes his throne.

This is why they were arguing about who is the greatest. Think about this: They were there with Jesus in the beginning, and now they feel like their commitment is about to pay off. With every new miracle, Jesus' fame grows, and the kingdom is looking more and more like a real possibility. They're ready to reign with Jesus, so they're arguing about which of them will be the greatest. But Jesus is talking about a cross. And it just makes no sense. You can't be king when you're dead.

They're thinking about everything in worldly terms. But the world is a perversion of the way God designed it. It's not supposed to be this way.

So Jesus teaches them something that sounds kind of backward. But it's not. It's really this world that is backward. Jesus says, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all" (9:35). The servant of all is really the greatest of all. That's the way it is in the Kingdom of God, and that's the way God desires for us to live in this life.

Now we want to grab onto this and say, "Okay, here's what I have to do if I really want to be the greatest. All I have to do is serve other people. All I have to do is pretend to be humble, and then everyone else will see how great I am." I remember a cartoon I read once. I think it was Hagar the Horrible, but I can't find it now so I'm not sure. But Hagar said to his friend, "I firmly believe the secret of my success is sincerity. Once you can fake that, you're home free." That might work in this world, but not in the Kingdom of God. Serving others is not a means to an end in order to become the greatest. That's just selfish. If you act humble in order for other people to notice your humility, that's not really humility. Even if no one else sees through it, God will. The kind of service Jesus is talking about is serving others for their sake, not our own.

God wills that we would delight in serving others, not because there's any glory in it for us, but simply for the sake of the people we serve. That's the way it is for Christ. Christ delighted to humble himself and serve us, not for the sake of his own glory, but for the sake of us who are saved by his service. And God's will is that we would delight in serving others the same way. But we just can't imagine delighting in humility and service. It doesn't seem enjoyable to us.

Our problem is that we have never experienced true virtue, so we can't imagine that it actually exists. We are by nature selfish. We were selfish the day we were born, we will be selfish the day we die, and we are selfish every day in between. And it's not just us, but everyone around us. So we can't imagine anything else. We assume God must crave glory and recognition as much as we do. But God is not like us. God delights in virtue, and the highest virtue is love (1 Cor. 13:13). Not love like the world talks about it. When the world talks about love, it usually means enjoyment or pleasure. That kind of love is just a stronger word for "like." It's really completely selfish. That's not the kind of love the Bible talks about. The Bible kind of love—the God kind of love—is sacrifice and service. It means putting someone else ahead of yourself. This is the highest virtue, and this is the virtue that best defines God. That's why the Bible says, "God is love" (1 John 4:8).

So God, being perfectly good and virtuous, delights in what is good and virtuous, even if it means intense pain and anguish for himself. Jesus actually delights in the cross. *The Letter to the Hebrews* says, "For the joy set before him [Jesus] endured the cross, despising the shame" (Heb. 12:2). That probably sounds kind of weird. Jesus endured the cross joyfully. If you know anything about crosses, that sounds impossible. It was painful and drawn out. Not only that, but it was a public sign that you were a criminal. People would mock you and yell at you as they walk by. It was a horrible way to die. But Jesus endured it joyfully, not in the sense that he enjoyed the pain, but in the sense that he delighted in the service he was performing. Jesus delights in the virtue of the cross. God delights to serve because his nature is love. Giving himself for the sake of his creatures is the most natural thing for him to do.

This makes no sense to us, because we are not that way. We desire glory, honor, riches, comfort, and, if possible, being the greatest. We love ourselves. That's just how we are, and we can't imagine anything else. This is the attitude of the sinful nature. We are curved in on ourselves. But God is not that way. He delights to serve, even if it means intense pain and anguish for himself. We simply cannot understand this, but that is how God is.

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On the Last Day, when Jesus raises us from the dead and transforms after his own image, we will delight in true service. But until then, this is hard for us to fathom. We can't imagine our desires being any other way.

But this is not simply an ideal we are waiting for in the new creation. God desires that we live this way now. Even though it means fighting against our natural desires, God's will is that we make ourselves last of all and be a servant of all. And we should not view this as a means to an end in order to secretly glorify ourselves. Instead, we should see service as an end in itself.

The example Jesus gives is a little child. "He took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, **'Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me'**" (9:36-37).

To receive this child means to serve him. It's like adopting an orphan or a foster child. It takes sacrifice and a lot of work. The idea is that you place this little child and his needs ahead of yourself. You actually consider the child to be more important than yourself.

Now think about this kind of sacrifice and commitment in contrast to the disciples' argument about who is the greatest. They were arguing about who would be the greatest in the Messianic Kingdom—the throne they hoped Jesus would establish. They were thinking in terms of worldly prestige and honor. It's actually very similar to how we think about worldly greatness, whether it's in sports or business or whatever. If you want to rise to the top in the business world or whatever kind of career you have, you have to dedicate yourself to it completely, because you know a lot of other people are dedicating themselves to being the best. If you're going to beat them, you have to dedicate yourself even more. But if you start receiving orphans and foster children, and if you start treating them as if they are more important than you are, you have to give up your dream of being the greatest in other areas of your life. And in fact, everything else you do in life, whether it's your career or something else, those things become your means of serving this child. You can't spend eighty hours a week at the office just because you want to make more money than the guy down the hall.

God's idea of greatness is completely different from the world's idea. In the eyes of the world, the guy who goes out and grabs what he can for himself is the greatest. He makes the most money and wins the most trophies. In the Kingdom of God, this man is nothing. Think about how counter-cultural that is. The most successful person in the world is nothing in the Kingdom of God. Meanwhile, the mom who devotes herself completely to her children is great. She receives little or no recognition from the world, but she is great in the Kingdom of God, because she has given herself to someone smaller and weaker. Of course, not everyone is a parent, and that's okay. But wherever God has placed you in life, find the neediest person there and serve that person. The one who serves the neediest is truly first in the Kingdom of God.

And this, of course, brings us back around to Jesus and the need for him to be delivered into the hands of men, to be killed, and to rise after three days. Jesus practices what he preaches. If it's radical for full-grown humans to become servants to miniature humans, then it's even more radical for the righteous and all-powerful God of the universe to stoop down and become the servant of his rebellious creatures. But this is what he did.

Consider this: Your God and King, the Lord Jesus Christ, is your Servant. This isn't how we naturally think of God. It might even seem a bit demeaning. At the very least it sounds completely backward. But this is natural way for God to think of himself, because God is love.

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Giving himself up in order to serve his rebellious creatures is the most natural thing for God to do.

So think about the cross. Think about the actual physical event of Jesus' crucifixion. Think about a thirty-three-year-old condemned criminal, beaten senseless, stripped of his clothing, bleeding from virtually every square inch on his body, spit upon, and mocked by strangers as they walk by. Fix that image in your mind. Now hear this: There never has been and never will be a clearer revelation of who God is.

And I hope you realize how ridiculous that sounds. The wisdom of the world will never recognize the greatness of that image. This is so unnatural to us. When we think about God, we think about him in terms of what we desire to be: glorious and powerful and exalted. And God certainly is all those things, and sometimes he reveals himself in those ways. But none of those things are his defining characteristic. God's defining characteristic is love. And that makes the cross the clearest revelation there could ever be of who God is. He has made himself the least. He has made himself the servant of all. Therefore, he is first and the greatest of all. The cross is his glory, and it is because of the cross that our God is worthy of all praise and honor. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.