

September 23, 2018

Mark 9:30-37

“Last of All and Servant of All”

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Have you ever noticed how Jesus turns everything upside down? Those who receive his words and take them seriously appear to be upside-down people! In fact, Christians are considered by many to be crazy. A.W. Tozer writes:

A real Christian is an odd number anyway. He feels supreme love for One whom he has never seen, talks to Someone he cannot see, expects to go to heaven on the virtue of Another, empties himself in order to be full, admits he is wrong so he can be declared right, goes down in order to get up, is strong when he is weak, rich when he is poor ... He dies so he can live, forsakes in order to have, gives away so he can keep, sees the invisible, hears the inaudible, and knows that which passes all understanding.

For the believer, nothing in life is as it appears to those who do not believe. Everything is turned on its head. To live by faith is to engage life itself as a set of paradoxes. And we have that in our Gospel lesson for this morning. By faith we understand that we can't achieve greatness by attempting to be great. One does not become powerful by exerting power. Jesus teaches us that nothing can be measured or properly understood merely by its appearance, and nothing of real consequence can be achieved by normal or even natural means. The paradoxes created by the message of Jesus simply won't allow us to engage this world straight up, which leads us to another conclusion. Because of sin, it is really this unbelieving world that is upside down!

Consider our lesson for this morning. Here Jesus teaches us that the way of greatness is the way of servitude. How can that be? Jesus says, "If anyone would be first, he must be **Last of All and Servant of All.**" It doesn't make sense from an unbeliever's perspective, and it certainly doesn't seem to play out that way in real life no matter how you try to spin it. Who Is The Greatest?

Maybe we could ask it a different way. What would make your life feel great? Would it be a spouse or children or more children? Would it be a better job - more money, a better boss, more responsibility, a better retirement? Maybe it would be more time buried in your reading list or watching your favorite sport or going to the places you want to go or shopping without a budget. Would you feel great if you were very important, powerful, in control, and the best and most successful in your field? Would it be enough to be a celebrity who is loved or at least known by millions. Stars are insanely enjoyed, celebrated, even worshiped. Marshall Segal writes in an article titled *What Will Make You Great*:

God refuses to define the greatness of your life in dollars or cents, family or friends or kids, promotions or raises, accomplishments or recognition or fun. He loves you too much, and there's too much at stake. When Jesus said he came that you might have a full and abundant life (John 10:10), he wasn't promising less debt, longer vacations, or more power in the company. His promise is real, and following him will satisfy us beyond our wildest imaginations, but it won't look like so much other so-called greatness around us.

He is right. Jesus turns everything upside down, or maybe I should say right side up! Consider the disciples in our lesson for this morning. They had found a king. They saw what Jesus could do. He was like a ticket to the "big time." Since they had been chosen by him and were closest to him they no doubt had stars in their eyes. He kept talking about the "Kingdom." All they could see was their power and authority, freedom and fame, a full and abundant life in this kingdom. Little did they know that the kingdom of Jesus is not of this world (John 18:36). Mark writes (9:30-32): "They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, 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.' But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him."

It is here that Jesus defines what his kingdom is all about, and greatness for that matter. The disciples totally miss it. The words were crystal clear. Still, the disciples didn't grasp it. Even more, they were afraid to ask Jesus about it. So, Jesus' disciples quietly talked among themselves as they walked through Galilee on their way to their home base at Capernaum. They had many hours to talk, since they traveled on foot in those days. And when they finally arrived at their destination, Jesus asked them, "What were you discussing on the way?" And there was silence. No one wanted to say out loud what everyone was thinking. While Jesus had been speaking of his own suffering, death, and resurrection, his disciples were quietly debating about which one of them was the greatest.

Does that surprise you? Jesus is teaching about the cross, but his disciples focus in on their own greatness! Who knows? Maybe they were even discussing who was going to take over when Jesus was gone! Even if that wasn't a part of the discussion, the disciples' behavior should not surprise us. The heart of sin is self-absorption, self-love, self-preservation, the exaltation of the self at the expense of others. But, ambition in this life for greatness in this life will end up in loss. The church is struggling with this very thing in our day. So many want to proclaim Christ crucified, but they don't want to be nailed with him. What many churches want is to be accepted and even great in the eyes of society and the world. Pastors and people want to be winners, not losers. But, the losers are the winners.

Daily death and resurrection are not exactly appealing ideas. Daily losing to win is not a great selling point for the church. But, this is the way of greatness and the way of Christ. Mark goes on to say: "And he [Jesus] 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.' And 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.'"

Last of All and Servant of All! That describes Jesus perfectly. A little later in Mark 10:34, Jesus will explain true greatness again in even more detail: "They will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him (Mark 10:34)." True greatness is understood in the unselfish sacrifice of Jesus Christ for those who are full of themselves and need to be rescued from themselves. Jesus takes the mocking, spitting, flogging, and death we deserve. He takes our sin, death, and hell in order to forgive us, raise us from the dead, and give us eternal life in heaven. True greatness can be summarized in the statement of Jesus:

“Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends (John 15:13).” And likewise, the words of Paul reflect the words of Jesus when he writes in Romans 9:1-3, “I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost, that I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart. For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh.” Paul could only say this because he had been touched by the Greatest One of all, and had been made great by him alone! In the words of one Lutheran Pastor:

He came to be the Chief Servant so that the orders of the world could be overturned and men and women could find their strength in Him from whom they came and to whom they must return. In this singular act Christ made possible freedom from everything that enslaves God’s fallen world so that it can again know and serve the Father. That is not an act of weakness, but of strength – by no means an act of seeking His own glory, but of giving up that He might take on Himself the weakness of our mortality and become a participant in our death. It was for this that He came into the world, and He did what was given Him [to do] with all the strength at His command.

When Jesus gave Himself as a gift of strength, he knew full well how immense the cost would be. But this is how he saved the world. This is how he saved you and me. He saves us by suffering, dying, and rising. **Last of All and Servant of All** that we may be first and served in everything. And, having been touched in that way by the one who is **last of all and servant of all**, we also can be last and serve others. In that way, all that can be given is given, and there is love.

Do you want to be great in the kingdom? As you can see, Jesus turns everything upside down that it may really be right side up! Jesus uses the object lesson of a child. What is notable about a child is that he/she is little. They are unimportant, yet they are the models of true faith. Faith receives what is given and in turn gives and gives. **Last of All and Servant of All** - the model of the Christian life.

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott