

September 22, 2024

Mark 9:30-37

“Jesus: The Greatest!”

Pilgrim Lutheran Church
2155 N. Oakland Ave.
Decatur, Illinois 62526

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In our gospel lesson for this morning we find Jesus and his disciples traveling through Galilee. They arrive at their destination and enter a house. And our Lord asks his disciples: “What were you discussing on the way?” There’s nothing worse than someone asking you what you’ve been up to when you know that you’ve been up to no good. We are told that the disciples became silent. I know it’s not in the text but I picture the disciples looking around and acting as if no one asked the question. Have you ever had someone pretend that they didn’t hear you? It’s like when the teacher asks a question and heads look down hoping that the teacher won’t notice and ask you to answer. So, what were the disciples talking about? We are told that they “had argued with one another about who was the greatest.”

People like the idea of being great. They want to be an exception and separate from everyone else. Such are filled with pride and arrogance so that they exaggerate their worth or importance. This attitude displays an obnoxious superiority that makes others feel small. Pride leads us to look at what we think are other people’s flaws and faults and criticize them in order to make us feel superior and better about ourselves. It prevents us from seeing our sins and confessing them. Moreover, it makes some Christians think that they are super-Christians and better than all the rest.

Interestingly, this wasn’t the only time that the disciples of Jesus got caught up in the sin of pride and arrogance. Luke records, that right after Jesus instituted his holy supper on the night of Passover, that the disciples begin to argue and dispute amongst each other as to who was the greatest. In other words, their condition of fighting over greatness was, to some extent, ongoing. For some reason that tends to relieve us to know that we are not the only ones who suffer from such constant ailments. Listen to the following from a Lutheran preacher:

A 2012 Harvard study shows just how prominent this desire is within people. The study, comprised of five brain imaging experiments, found that the urge to share information about one’s life is more powerful than previously thought. Researchers found that sharing information about themselves triggered the same sensations in the brain synonymous with eating food and intimate pleasure in their subjects. Participants had been offered a financial incentive to respond to questions about other people; but many passed on the money, preferring to answer questions about themselves.

We love ourselves in more ways than one. And we frequently love ourselves at the expense of other people, rather than loving ourselves to give ourselves to others. St. James in the Epistle Reading says this, “But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.” Well, that certainly puts things into perspective wouldn’t you say? And if we are really honest with ourselves we tend to struggle with this more frequently than we care to admit. These words really hurt in a lot of ways because we see how our pride and arrogance gets in the way of so many things, including our salvation.

Jesus says in our lesson: “‘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.’” Those words of Jesus had to be unexpected from the perspective of the disciples! A child is not considered to be great. Keep in mind, that on another occasion, Matthew records the following: “Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people, but Jesus said, ‘Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.’ And he laid his hands on them and went away (Matt. 19:13-15).” To the disciples, Jesus had greater things to do than to be bogged down by insignificant children. But Jesus will have none of that. He gives himself to these children in true love and service and prays for them.

What is Greatness? Who is the Greatest? Those are some important questions. Let’s start with the first question. What is Greatness? Well, just a moment ago we saw greatness in Jesus with the children. He gives himself in service to them by blessing them with his hands and praying for them. This giving of himself finds its ultimate expression at the cross and empty tomb. And this really takes us to the bottom line. The greatest love is sacrificing oneself for another - even for unimportant children. And this definition is exactly what we see right before the disciples’ discussion about who is the greatest among them. They have totally missed what Jesus was saying to them before they got into this discussion.

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. But they do enter into a discussion about their own personal greatness, as if greatness has nothing to do with the cleansing of our sins.

So, Jesus’ disciples quietly talked among themselves as they walked along the road. While Jesus had spoken to them of his own suffering, death, and resurrection, his disciples were quietly debating about their own personal worth and importance. They were jockeying for position and power in the kingdom. The heart of sin is self-absorption, self-love, self-preservation, the exaltation of the self at the expense of others. But, ambition for greatness in this life will end up in loss. We as Christians struggle with this all the time, and the only antidote for this kind of thinking is to see our wicked self-love and receive the unselfish giving of Jesus to forgive our pride and arrogance. Not only do we struggle with this as individuals, but the church is struggling. What many churches want is to be accepted and even great in the eyes of society and this unbelieving world. Pastors and people want to be winners, not losers. But, the losers are the winners!

Daily death of wicked self-love and resurrection unto newness of life are not exactly appealing ideas. But, this is the way of greatness and the way of Christ. And that brings us to the second questions: Who is the Greatest? Once again, Mark records the words of Jesus: ‘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 ...’”

A little later in Mark 10:34, the next chapter, Jesus will explain true greatness again in even more vivid detail. He says: “They will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him (Mark 10:34).” Here we must keep in mind that he endured these things to serve us with the forgiveness of sins and eternal life! You can’t get any greater than what Jesus did for us! He rescues us from pride and arrogance. Jesus takes the mocking, spitting, flogging, and death we deserve. He takes our sins, death, and hell in order to forgive us, raise us from the dead, and give us eternal life in heaven. Finally, we read in the 13th chapter of the gospel of John:

He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him ... When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, “Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.”

Those who have been cleansed from the filth of sin, need only a cleansing for daily sins, as Jesus says, “The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean.” Thus, we are to understand that Jesus not only cleanses the entire Christian, but he also cleanses and forgives the sins of weakness in daily life. This then is the meaning of the foot washing. The greatest service that we can render to all brothers and sisters in Christ, flows from Jesus himself who was and is The Greatest. As we have been loved and cleansed by him, so do we clean others with the cleansing we have received from him. This service is no mechanical repetition of washing feet. It is the blessing of forgiveness in Jesus our Lord, who defines greatness in this gift, and who is truly the greatest of all!

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott