

Sept. 20, 2015 – Mark 9:30-37 (OT: Jeremiah 11:18-20 Epistle: James 3:13-4:10)

Greatness is Found in Jesus' Humility and Service

What makes a person great? Is it their accomplishments? The legacy they leave behind? Their fame and fortune? The world often looks to these things to judge one's "greatness", but in our Gospel reading Jesus tells us that God looks at things differently. True greatness is found in humility and service, especially the humility and service of Jesus Himself.

In our reading Jesus departs from the villages of Caesarea Philippi (Mark 8:27) and passes through Galilee with His disciples on the way to Capernaum. He didn't want anyone to know He was passing through Galilee because He wanted time alone with His disciples to teach them. His miraculous works of healing and casting out demons were well known and wherever He went He attracted large crowds. And this would have hindered His time with the disciples.

The miracles Jesus did showed that He was the One who was to come and save the world. They showed that He was God who came to bring salvation, as was foretold in Isaiah (see Isaiah 34:4-7a) which we looked at a few weeks ago. But Jesus did not come to simply heal people from earthly illness; He came to do something much greater. And that is what He needed to teach His disciples.

As they passed through Galilee, Jesus told them: "*The Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of men, and they will kill Him. And after He is killed, He will rise the third day.*" (v. 31). This wasn't the first time Jesus had told them this. Back in chapter 8 Jesus "*began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He spoke this word openly*" (Mark 8:31-32). At that point Peter took Jesus aside and rebuked Him and Jesus said to Peter, "*Get behind Me, Satan! For you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men*" (Mark 8:33). Then after six days, Jesus took Peter, James and John up on a high mountain and they saw Jesus change before them. On the way down from the mountain, Jesus told them not tell anyone what they had seen "*till the Son of Man had risen from the dead*" (Mark 9:9). They didn't understand then what Jesus meant by "*rising from the dead*" (Mark 9:9). And here again we read that they didn't understand what Jesus told them and they were afraid to ask Him!

It is perhaps hard for us to put ourselves in the place of the disciples. We live almost two thousand years after Jesus was betrayed into the hands of men, killed, and rose from the dead. We have heard the whole account of Jesus' death and resurrection year after year and sermon after sermon. So it is difficult for us to imagine why Jesus' own disciples didn't get it and why they were looking for Jesus to restore an earthly kingdom to Israel.

Remembering some of the things that happened in Caesarea Philippi, however, can help us understand where the disciples were coming from. I mentioned one of the big ones: the transfiguration of Jesus. Jesus took Peter, James, and John up on a mountain and was changed in appearance before them so that they saw His glory (Mark 9:2-8). His clothes became shining, exceedingly white, and Elijah and Moses appeared to them. In the church year we commemorate the Lord's transfiguration right before Lent as we review the life of Jesus from His birth in Bethlehem, which we celebrate on Christmas, to His death on Good Friday and His resurrection on Easter Sunday. Because we have already talked about Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain in Caesarea Philippi back in February, our readings for the past Sundays jumped over it. But the transfiguration took place shortly before our reading today, and helps us understand what Jesus' disciples were thinking.

Last week we read what happened when Jesus, Peter, James and John came down from that mountain. They found a large crowd waiting for them and some Jewish scribes arguing with the disciples who had remained behind. The issue was the man's son who had a mute spirit. The disciples had not been able to cast it out, so Jesus cast out the demon and healed the boy.

When we consider all the miracles that the disciples had witnessed and even performed themselves when Jesus sent them out, and the glimpse of Jesus' divine glory on the mountain that three of them had seen, we can perhaps understand a little better why they had trouble comprehending Jesus' words here that He would be betrayed into the hands of men, killed, and then rise the third day. With all the power Jesus possessed and demonstrated, how could He be handed over to mere men and be put to death? That idea went against their vision of Jesus ushering in a "heaven on earth" – a kingdom of glory here and now, one in which they would play important roles.

We know that Jesus came to die for the sins of the world and to rise again from the dead so that our sins maybe forgiven and we can live eternally with Jesus in heaven. While we understand that (unlike Jesus' disciples here), we can often fall into the same thinking as the disciples. Because we live in this world corrupted by sin, full of suffering and sorrow, we often wish that Jesus would make things better for us here and now.

I am not saying that God will not and does not help you and me. He does and He is with us always. The problem comes in when we want to dictate what God's help should be, and when we make the things of this world our focus. We may not go as far as those who teach a "gospel of prosperity" – who ask you to send in a gift of seed money, and if you do, God will bless it and multiply it and give you health and wealth. But isn't it easy at times to think that things should be easier, that things should be going better if we believe in God and God is with us? But as Jesus here taught the disciples, the way to glory was His cross.

When they arrived at Capernaum, Jesus asked them what they had been arguing about on the road. He, of course, as God with divine knowledge, knew what they had been discussing. They didn't answer, either out of embarrassment or fear of chastisement for having disputed among themselves who would be the greatest in the kingdom of God. Or perhaps they were afraid Jesus would answer the question and most of them would be disappointed by His selection.

This dispute is understandable when we remember that Jesus had only taken Peter, James, and John up on the mountain of transfiguration. And Jesus had only taken these same three into the house of Jairus when He raised Jairus' daughter from the dead (Mark 5:37). It seemed that these three were Jesus' "favorites". Perhaps this prompted the dispute. Were Peter, James, and John going to be greater than the other disciples in the glorious kingdom of God that they were expecting Jesus would usher in?

Jesus answered their question, the question they were afraid to ask. He sat down, which was the standard way in which a teacher taught, so this was to be a formal lesson, and called the twelve to gather around. And He said to them, "*If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all*" (v. 35). Their reaction to this is not recorded here, but I am sure this was not the answer they were expecting. Being last and servant of all was not probably not their definition of greatness. Shouldn't greatness mean that you are first and have people to serve you?

But with God, greatness comes from humility and service. To illustrate this point Jesus set a little child in their midst. Children were expected to honor their father and mother and even serve them. So this little child was an apt example of someone who was last and a servant of all. But

then Jesus takes the child in His arms and says, “*Whoever receives one of these little children in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me, receives not Me but Him who sent Me*” (v. 37).

When you think of “doing great things for the kingdom of God” what comes to your mind? Is receiving a little child the first thing that you think of? Jesus’ disciples probably had been thinking about the authority to heal the sick and drive out demons that Jesus had given them (see Matthew 10:5-8) and were looking forward to having even more power and authority when Jesus finally restored the kingdom of Israel. But here Jesus tells them to receive and serve a little child! We can see that the disciples didn’t have much time for little children when, in the very next chapter of Mark, they try to prevent people from bringing little children to Jesus so that He might touch them (Mark 10:13). It seems they did not take to heart the lesson that Jesus here taught them.

But are we much different? I remember that in a church I used to attend, it always seemed difficult to find people were willing to teach Sunday School. That may have been for a variety of reasons, such as someone not feeling qualified, but I can remember not wanting to teach Sunday School because of the time and effort it involved, and because I did not see it as important as some of other things I could be doing in the church. But here, Jesus places this little child front and center, and equates caring for a little child with receiving Jesus Himself and with receiving God the Father. What a different perspective that gives on teaching Sunday School! And what different perspective that gives on being a parent!

Greatness in the God’s kingdom is the opposite of what the world considers to be greatness. It involves humility and service. It is the opposite of what we naturally think, so we can relate the disciples’ struggle here to learn Jesus’ lesson. But Jesus’ Himself embodied this humility and service. He came not to be served but to serve and to give His life as our ransom (Mark 10:45). He humbled Himself and became obedient even to the point of dying on the cross (Philippians 2:8) to take away your sins and to reconcile you to God, and calls us to have the same mind (Philippians 2:5) of service and humility.

Our epistle reading tells us more of what it means to humbly serve others. It means to be “*peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy*” (James 3:17). The world and the devil try to convince us that in doing these things we will miss out. But that is not true. Our epistle reading also says: “*Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.*” (James 4:10)

Jesus’ death on the cross seemed to the disciples like the end of Jesus’ great ministry and their hope of a glorious kingdom, but it was not the end. Rather it was the means by which God reconciled the world to Himself. Jesus’ inglorious death has brought many to glory (Hebrews 2:10). Jesus rose again on the third day, as He here foretold to His disciples, so that He now lives to be with us and serve us as our intercessor with the Father. And He will raise you up on the last day.

So seek your greatness in the humility and service of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Humble yourself before God in service to others and trust in Him to lift you up. Amen.

Rock of Ages Evangelical Lutheran Church

www.GrandRapidsLutheran.org

Pastor Peter T. Evensen

616-322-9167 (cell) – peterevensen@icloud.com