

“The Great and the Small Works of God”

Mark 9:38-50

Last week, we heard Jesus give His disciples an object lesson on what it means to be great because they had been arguing with one another concerning who was the greatest. In the Kingdom of God, the mark of greatness is seen in humility. Greatness is found in the willingness to disavow any authority over our life that we think we have. Greatness is found in those who serve without expecting to be noticed or congratulated for their service. Greatness is found in those who have compassion for the weak or the outcast – for the helpless. And Jesus had taken the little child and embraced him. He humiliated Himself in the eyes of any upstanding Jewish man. That was woman’s work. Important men did not have time for little children.

This is what happened immediately before what we read of today in our Gospel. Jesus brought the child into their midst and said, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.” You would imagine the disciples really learned their lesson, and now they understand their place in the Kingdom of God and know what needs to be done.

And you hear the Gospel lesson today, which are the following verses, and you realize that they still don’t have a clue. This seems to be a recurring theme as we read through Mark’s Gospel – really all the Gospels. Remember, two weeks ago, the disciples were puzzled because they couldn’t cast the demon out of the one boy. And Jesus said, “This kind can only be cast out by prayer.”

And the disciples had to be thinking, “Prayer? You mean anyone can do this?” Which was the point Jesus was trying to make. The disciples are very full of themselves and see faith and the power of Christ as their personal private possession.

So, of course, when they see someone else casting out demons in Jesus’ name – and without their permission. “Well, that sort of thing had to be stopped. He was not one of us.” But Jesus once again puts them in their place. He says, “Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me.” And the word translated “mighty” is the Greek word “meGas” – the same word used by the disciples when they were arguing about who was the greatest. Who is the “mega-disciple?”

Jesus says, “This guy, who you told to stop casting out demons, is doing more than you are, because clearly he sees the power of God and the power of faith as coming from outside of himself. You, on the other hand, think that greatness is some inherent quality you possess within you, or is found in your status as one of the 12. Debating about who is the greatest is absurd. Just as God alone is good, God alone confers greatness.” And He does so purely as a gracious gift.

Greatness is seen even in the giving of a cup of water when done for the right reasons. We must never think that what we do in this life does not matter, or that what you do has no impact. What the world counts as greatness is not what God counts as greatness.

Jesus chose to use a small child as the example of greatness because of how faith is perceived. The disciples saw greatness in faith, because faith and the power of God to heal and drive out demons was their personal possession. Christ says, “Without the faith of a little child, you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven.”

This little child would be helpless in this world, if he relied on his own strength. Helplessness is the opposite of greatness in our sinful mind's eye. Just as giving a cup of cold water to someone is thought of as being a small, insignificant act – to God, it is the standard of greatness when done in response to the Gospel.

Our sinful nature likes to focus on the big picture and says, "Don't bother me with the details." But without details, there is no picture. It is just a cloudy blur. It is certainly not a masterpiece. The doctrine, the teaching of Christ and His church is a masterpiece. The world wants the teachings of Jesus to be a cloudy blur.

Likewise, it is in the daily details of your life that greatness within the Kingdom of God is achieved. We can sit back and wish for more people to hear the Gospel and come to church. But God does not waft through the ceiling and say, "Here I am." "Faith comes by hearing." In your words, in your actions, in the details of your life, Christ is revealed.

And do not say, "I don't have the words, or what I do is insignificant." Jesus says giving a cup of water, because you belong to Christ, is the epitome of greatness. Do not underestimate God's strength and ability to work through you.

Ask yourself this question, "Did I come to know Christ through a great, mighty, eye-popping spectacle? Or was it through the daily and weekly exposure to God's Word and the means of grace found in His Church?" My guess is that, for most of us, our parents or a faithful guardian brought us to the services in God's House, taught us the Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and we had no idea how dynamic of a gift we were receiving.

The seemingly small details of your life can be, and are, some of the greatest works of God. Do not underestimate God's strength and ability to work through you. Amen.