

“God is Great! But What is Greatness?”

Mark 9:30-37

We hear in Mark’s Gospel that Jesus once again speaks plainly about what was going to happen to Him: How He would be rejected by the people, crucified, die, and three days later be raised to life.

Jesus and the disciples are moving on – heading toward Jerusalem. Jesus speaks in very clear language about what is going to happen when He gets there. He will be betrayed, killed, and after three days He will rise.

Mark records that the disciples did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask Him about it. They remember what happened when Peter confronted Jesus a few days earlier when Jesus had said the same thing. Jesus said, “Get behind Me, Satan! You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.”

None of the disciples wanted to be rebuked by the Lord, so they sat quietly in their ignorance and held onto their human ideals of what the Christ was supposed to be. Worldly greatness and position in life was so much of their focus that they were arguing among themselves about which of them was the greatest.

Which of them would have the highest position in the kingdom Christ was establishing? Who would have the highest title? Who would have

the places of honor? Who would be Secretary of State? Who would be Secretary of Agriculture? Who would rule? And who would serve?

Jesus sits them down and lets them know what true greatness is. This won't be their last lesson either. In the Upper Room, when Jesus washes their feet, literally takes on the role of the servant, and performs that lowly task, the disciples get a good object lesson on being a servant in the Kingdom of God.

As we heard in Mark's Gospel today, Jesus gave them a different object lesson, but one with pretty much the same message. He has one of the little children who are traveling with them – as there were seemingly always other people around – He takes the little child in His arms and says, "Whoever receives one of these little children in my name receives me."

You have to understand the culture. Important men in Jewish society did not deal with little children. It was beneath them to do so. That was a woman's job. The disciples, on several occasions, demonstrated this prevailing attitude that some people were not worthy of their time and certainly not the Lord's time and attention. They tried to stop the little children from coming up to Jesus to be blessed. They asked Jesus to send away the Canaanite woman who was bothering them with her constant pleas to have her daughter healed – in their mind, that was something or someone not to be concerned about. They had important things to do.

Jesus lets the disciples know that if you consider yourself above others, you will never know greatness in the Kingdom of God. If you want

to be first, you must be the very last and the servant of all. The people of God are on this earth for one reason – to serve – not to rule.

We are to help those who are lacking physical needs, the outcast, the unfortunate. And we do this to help them, but most importantly, we do this to let the light of Christ “shine before men, than they may see our good deeds and praise our Father in heaven,” as Jesus says.

The purpose of serving and helping those who are in need is not to bring about social equality. That will never happen. It is an economic impossibility, and even Jesus says, “The poor you will always have with you.” The work at a Food Pantry, the clothing and quilts sent through Lutheran World Relief, money sent through missions, the work of the LWML, and the daily acts of kindness shown by the people of God here in Quincy and around the world are not primarily done for the betterment of society. The betterment of society is a byproduct. This is a part of our work within the Kingdom of God.

By taking part in these and similar activities we demonstrate the love of God to those who otherwise may not know the love of God. Man in his natural state, being continually plagued by the sin of Adam, acts like Adam. Our human nature seeks to take care of ourselves first. “I’m looking out for number one.” We desire to *have* – we especially desire to have more than those around us. Like Adam, our sinful nature is not content with being a child of God, we want to be God. We want to have authority over our own life. “I can take care of myself, thank you very much.” – which is why unselfish acts done in the name of God stand out so vividly in this self-centered world.

The irony in this, is that the selfish attitude brought forth by our sinful nature demonstrates the complete lack of knowledge of God that our sinful nature possesses. Because, if we truly desire to be our own God or put ourselves in the place of God, that is, to have authority and ownership over our own lives, then we must do what God does. We must love unconditionally. We must place the needs of others over our own well-being. We must be of such a noble will that we would be willing to leave the glory of heaven so that we may suffer upon a cross. Thanks be to God that we are not our own authority, and that we live under the authority of our God who loves us unconditionally and sent His Son to suffer what we deserve and rose from the death that we may have life.

Greatness and God-like activities are truly very different than the world would imagine. Welcoming those who are outside your normal circle of friends; showing kindness to those who you might not really care to be around; reminding yourself that you are not so important that you do not have time for those who need you; and remembering that whatever we do to another person here on earth we do to Christ:

That is the life of faith. That is being a disciple. That is the way in which we show thanks to God for what He has done for us. The love and compassion of God is seen in the love and compassion of the people of God. That is our calling in the Kingdom of God. It is the mark of greatness. “If anyone wants to be first, he must be the last of all, and the servant of all.” Amen.