

September 19, 2021
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
St. Timothy Lutheran Church – Huber Heights, OH
Pastor Joel Sutton

Mark 9:30-37 (James 3:13 – 4:10)

SERVICE FOR THE SAKE OF JESUS' NAME.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Our text for meditation today comes from the Gospel according to St Mark, the 9th chapter, which you heard read earlier.

In our text, we hear the second of Jesus' three predictions of His coming Passion in Jerusalem. As He taught His disciples He said:

“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.”³² But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him.” (Mark 9:31–32)

They had already witnessed the wonderous earthly ministry of Jesus. He has healed the sick, cast out demons, walked on water, fed thousands of people, and even raised the dead. Jesus had brought the Kingdom of God into their presence. But their faith was weak. They didn't understand, and neither would have you nor I.

First, the natural man cannot comprehend the facts about Jesus' incarnation, suffering, death, and Resurrection. Secondly, you and I have hindsight and history. We've heard the story of Jesus' death and Resurrection so many times, it's impossible for us to put ourselves in the disciples' sandals and hear with their First Century ears something so incredible and confounding. Jesus will be killed at the hands of men and then rise from the dead? They didn't know what this meant, and they were afraid to find out. To them, it looked like the Kingdom of God was this: Jesus setting up an earthly kingdom, to defeat all the political and military enemies, and reign as an earthly king.

Because the disciples could not understand what Jesus was saying, they resorted to talking about their favorite subject... the one that made them most comfortable: Who was the greatest among them? Because, if Jesus is going to set up an earthly kingdom, He's certainly going to need cabinet members. Which one of them is going to be chief of staff, or secretary of the defense, or secretary of commerce? They were bickering over who was best suited to have a prominent position in Jesus' administration – just like you and I would have if we would have been one of the Twelve. Or not.

So maybe you have no aspirations of holding public office or climbing the corporate ladder. Perhaps you are content being a common person, living an ordinary life in a unassuming home. But you still have a problem. You cannot escape your old Adam, that sinful nature that's woven

into the fabric of your very being. In your sinful human wisdom, you still want to be your own god. You do not want to serve the Holy Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – but worship the unholy trinity of me, myself, and I. You want to be in charge. You want preferential treatment. Call it pulling rank or taking precedence over someone else, we all have an inner desire to be first, to be great.

When you're sick, you want to be able to see the doctor right away, without an appointment and the waiting room. On the highway you risk life and limb to pass the truck in front of you, knowing that your exit is less than a half-mile down the road – and you feel your time is more important. When you argue with the referee or the police officer because you think you know the rules and the law better than they. At the grocery store, you want to cut and be first in line. You only have 5 items and the guy in front of you has two full carts and a fist full of coupons. You believe you're better than he. You want to be first. You and I are the same as the disciples. We are all sinful human beings. We think we should be first because we are more important. We want to be the greatest, maybe in a quiet reserved sort of way, but we want to be the greatest.

St James has a stern warning for you and me in our epistle reading this morning. He writes:

"¹ What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? ² You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. ⁴ You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God." (James 4:1–4)

In our Gospel text, the ever compassionate and patient Jesus knows His disciple's hearts, just as He knows your heart and mine. He could have confronted them while they were bickering amongst themselves along the way, but He waited until they stopped in the house. It was a teaching moment. Jesus sits down and calls the disciples to gather around, and He illustrates one of the greatest paradoxes in the Bible, saying:

"If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." (Mark 9:35)

In the original language, there are two different words that are often translated into English as *servant*:

- *δοῦλος* (doulos) which is a slave that takes orders from a master and serves him. (ANLEX, 120)
- *διάκονος* (diakonos) which is one who renders helpful service to others. (ANLEX, 109)

The *servant* in our text is not the word for slave but the *servant* who renders helpful service to others. It's not like a waiter at your restaurant table acting only upon request. It's a full and perfect sacrifice of self, out of love for neighbor, whether in life or death.

In the world to be the leader and acknowledged as being first, you must have others working for you and *servicing* you. But in Christ's Church, the reverse is true. Rank is given in proportion to

the service rendered to others. The humbler the person and the more willing he is to serve his fellow man, the higher he stands in the sight God.

The disciples didn't understand Jesus' saying regarding His death and resurrection. They didn't understand that in His incarnation He made Himself last. There was nothing at all that Jesus could do would raise his status or greatness. He's already God! But He gave up everything... becoming servant of all... delivering Himself over to bleed and die on the cross to save you from the debt of your transgressions. To save you from the sin of your selfish ambition and jealousy... the shame of your quarrels and fighting... and the judgement of selfishly creating a false god in your own image. Jesus emptied Himself of everything to redeem you... securing your forgiveness, life, and salvation. To illustrate, Jesus wrapped His arms around a little child and said:

“Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.” (Mark 9:37)

In the culture of Jesus' day, a child was a nobody. To be sure, they were a precious gift from God to the parents; however, just like today, they were the weakest and most vulnerable members of society. In those days, they were the first to suffer from famine, war, and disease. (cf: Concordia Commentary: Mark 8:2 – 16:20, Voelz, Mitchell, 703) They had no value or social status until adulthood.

How can a little child repay the debt for anything done for them? It's impossible. They are helpless and powerless. They simply live day to day, trusting a servant is going to care for their every need.

Jesus' illustration of the child ***does not*** mean that to be great, you should only serve little ones. No, it is service to everyone... with and without infirmities... and to young and old alike. Jesus is talking about service all mankind – to love others as yourselves. That is what it means to be the greatest in the Kingdom of God. Jesus teaches that serving and receiving anyone of any age in His Name is an act of faith in the Savior. Serving others for the sake of Jesus is serving God. To be first, you must be servant of all... even servant of the helpless child.

Now, of course, lots of people serve little ones, believers and unbelievers alike. But here's the key: Jesus said: ***“Whoever receives one such child in my name... for the sake of my name.”*** How do you receive a child for the sake of Jesus' Name? You must already be a child of the kingdom of God. The Holy Spirit must have already called you through the Gospel or in the waters of Baptism, adopting you into the family of God. At the font, your old Adam was drowned and a new man emerged to live before God in righteousness and purity. It is where God took your filthy, sinful heart, and purified it in His Word of promise. He created within you a clean heart and renewed right spirit (cf: Psalm 51:10) so that your works are righteous in God's sight. And that same Spirit empowers you to do good works and deeds of serving others for the sake of Jesus. As a believer, you cannot help but to perform good works and deeds.

Notice though, that nowhere in our text does Jesus condemn Godly ambition and work ethic, enjoying the wonderful blessings that God has bestowed upon you in your vocation. He gives you those things to steward over so that you better serve others. Jesus is also not saying to go sell

everything and go into full-time service work. Yes, that is the calling of some, but each is called to their own vocation. Whether you are a doctor, lawyer, run a business, a household, or are a student or parent, you serve through your vocation – serving for the sake of Jesus' Name. But, as soon as your motivation comes from selfish ambition and the desire to be top dog or the greatest, you've lost your standing and have gone from the top – to the bottom.

As God's own child, marked by the Name of Jesus, you can now rightly delight yourself in the Lord, and He, in return, pours out the desires of your heart. And what's the desire of your new heart? It's the Triune God Himself. You delight in knowing that Jesus has made peace between God and you. You delight in Jesus coming to you in His Body and Blood, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. You delight in the Holy Spirit strengthening your faith in the preaching of the Gospel. You delight in possessing the hope of life, eternal salvation, and the resurrection on the Last Day.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, friendship with the world is hostility with God and whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. (cf: James 4:4) Your citizenship is in heaven. (cf: Philippians 3:20) To the disciples, serving a little child appeared insignificant; however, in God's eyes every life is precious. That's why:

“... the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

He was like a gentle lamb led to slaughter. He never said a word of complaint when He took your guilt and sinfulness upon Himself. He never said a word when they nailed Him to the cross in service to you. He wasn't motivated by human self-interest but by the interests of others... in the interest of you. Jesus became servant of all, so that He might reconcile you to the Father and redeem you from your sin.

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understand, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,
Amen.