

Servant of All

Mark 9:33-37

Trinity Lutheran – Kearney, Missouri

September 23, 2018 – Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost



In the name of the Father, and of † the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. In this morning's Gospel, we saw the aftermath of the self-centered, self-serving debate between some disciples of Jesus, concerning – of all things – which of them would be the greatest! Now to be fair, this disagreement probably arose in large part from the fact that only a short time earlier Jesus had taken Peter, James, and John up with Him to the Mount of Transfiguration where they had witnessed a conversation between Moses, Elijah and Jesus who were discussing His upcoming trip to Jerusalem and Calvary's cross – where He would die for the sins of the world. Could there be any doubt that after all the things those disciples had seen that there would eventually be some discussion concerning what sort of glory the future might hold for each them – and which of them might hold the seat of greatest honor in Jesus' upcoming kingdom?

So, knowing exactly what had just happened, our Lord Christ confronted them and asked: "What were you arguing about back there on the road?" Because Jesus had caught them in the act, they were too embarrassed to tell Him what had happened. Yet, notice how patiently and compassionately our Lord dealt with them. He sat down, gathered them together, then calmly explained that in His Kingdom, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last – the servant of all." Then He used an object lesson to drive His point home. Summoning a little child into their midst He said: "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in My name welcomes Me – and whoever welcomes Me not only welcomes Me, but even more importantly, he welcomes the One who sent Me."

Now all this might seem quite simple and straightforward for those who think they are already familiar with the story, but just consider for a moment the monumental import of these words of Jesus. The key to properly understanding this text is found only in the phrase: "*in My name*." Jesus says that *whoever* welcomes one of these little children *in His name* also welcomes Him. Without those words, one might conclude Jesus was merely encouraging us to be friendly toward children and

to take an interest in their welfare! But such is most certainly *not* Jesus' intent. You see, you can welcome a friend to dinner, or you can welcome someone new to the neighborhood, but as "friendly" as such actions might be, there is nothing inherently Christ-like about such behavior.

To do something *in Jesus' name*, means Christ's presence has to be invoked – that His Spirit, work, and everything He stands for as Lord and Savior has to come into play. That's why Christianity is so often misunderstood – even among many who call themselves Christians – yes, even many who call themselves Lutheran. A Christian, you see, isn't the person who attempts to do everything like Jesus does it – for the truth of the matter is that none of us could ever do anything to the satisfaction of God. Jesus didn't come into our world to give us a new set of moral guidelines – or to be an example to live by. He came into this world to save us from our sin!

The message of the Gospel is that you have a Savior who came and did what you could never have done. It's about One Man – the God-Man – whose life was in every way perfect and complete – not just admirable or commendable, but *perfect and Godly in every way possible!* The message of the Gospel is that God became man so that He could redeem us and our lives – yours, mine and everyone else's – from the sentence of an eternity in hell and endless separation from the Father. Jesus wasn't speaking in simple, moralistic terms here when He talked about how we are to welcome little children. It's not in *our* own name – or according to *our* own charity and goodwill – that we are to welcome them and others, but only through Christ and His Word.

So, let's go back to what Jesus said earlier to those disciples who were arguing among themselves which of them would be the greatest. He told them: "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last – the servant of all." But, who is the only One who can truly and rightly be called Servant of all? The answer, of course, is Jesus. He alone is able to do that. He alone came "not to be served, but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for

many.” What comfort it is for you to hear those words in light of what you know are your own shortcomings and failures. What joy it is for you to know that in spite of the fact that you all too often look out only for your own interests rather the interests of your neighbor, that you have a Savior who has overcome all this – a Savior who has set things right once and for all between all of us and God.

In all this God has given each of us a place in His Kingdom because we have been welcomed *in Christ’s name* – many of us as little children – when Jesus held us in His arms in the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, washed and cleansed us from all our sin, placed His name upon us, and claimed us as His own. And we are also welcomed *in His name* whenever we gather for worship under the name of our Triune God – Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit – and when our pastor absolves and forgives us our sin in the stead and by the command of Christ. The reading of the Holy Scriptures, the administration of the Lord’s Supper, and the prayers we bring before the throne of God, all are done in the name of Christ. And indeed, it’s only *in His name* that any of this is possible.

All of which takes us, once again, to the question which began this discussion: “Who is the greatest?” Jesus says: “Whoever welcomes one of these little children *in My name* welcomes Me; and whoever welcomes Me does not welcome Me but the One who sent Me.” What our Lord Christ wants all of His disciples to learn – then and now – is that not a one of us are to set ourselves up as judge and jury over who is acceptable and who is not – or who is to be the greatest. If there is nothing you can do to qualify yourself for admission into the Kingdom of God, then neither are you in a position to decide who among us is going to have the most honored position when we arrive there.

The bottom line, dear Christian, is that when you play the status game, you are rejecting the way God desires to bring you into His Kingdom. You and I, we are part of the Kingdom *only* because God has welcomed each of us *in Christ’s name* – a welcome which is based *only* on His unmerited love toward us – and *not* because any of us earned it. And when you argue among yourselves – or simply ponder in your own mind how great or how

little you are in the kingdom of God you are robbing Christ of the glory due Him, and claiming that glory as your own. On the other hand, when you humbly recognize that you have been welcomed by God only on account of the work of His Son for us all, then you will also gladly welcome your fellow disciples.

Realizing this you can now look at one another and honestly say: “You were chosen just I was – by God’s grace.” For it’s only God who enables you to happily acknowledge one another as a brothers or a sister in Christ because of the realization that none of us deserve this honor. To be sure, the only reason you are part of God’s family is because He has had mercy on us all. So, who are you to evaluate the worth or status of anyone else whom God has adopted? You can only conclude that your brothers and sisters in Christ are just as special and important to God as you are for we have all been blessed to be redeemed and restored by Christ who willingly deigned to shed His own precious blood for us sinners on Calvary’s cross so that we might live and never die.

Christ became Servant of all, in order that you might be blessed and honored to be a recipient of His grace and mercy. So by that grace and mercy, consider well the meaning of Jesus’ words: “Whoever welcomes one of these little children *in My name* welcomes Me; and whoever welcomes Me, welcomes not Me, but Him who sent Me.” When you acknowledge someone as a brother or a sister in Christ, what you’re doing is acknowledging the work of Christ on behalf of us all. We were all equally lost, and we have all been equally found. There is only one who is “Greatest” in the Kingdom of God – and that’s our Lord Jesus Christ, Himself. In Him you have been raised to the status of a child of God – an heir of His eternal kingdom. Hence God has given you the great privilege of welcoming others into His Kingdom – little children and adults alike – just as you were welcomed – in *the name of Jesus*. May it always be so for His name’s sake. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.