

September 23, 2018
Sermon for the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
St Peter Lutheran Church
Bowie, TX
Larry Knobloch, Pastor
Mark 9:30-37

J.J.- Jesu Juva—Help me, Jesus

Mark 9:30–37 (ESV)

³⁰ They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, ³¹ for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “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. ³³ And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you discussing on the way?” ³⁴ But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. ³⁵ And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.” ³⁶ And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.”

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior,
Jesus Christ!

Amen.

For as long as I can remember, I 35 has been under construction. When we lived in Giddings in the 80's and 90's we made numerous trips to Austin for shopping and doctors, I 35 was under construction. The same thing when we started traveling through Fort Worth on a regular basis. I 35 is still under construction. Put to the test, thousands of people behind the wheels of cars and trucks show either grace or lack of grace, by driving calmly, letting other drives in or cutting them off as the case may be. One car length ahead can seem like a victory over another driver. Are you a selfish driver or a gracious driver? Or a mixture of both?

On streets and highways, yes, we see this one-upmanship a lot. But most paths of modern life are just as crowded. Who is first and who is last confronts us with supreme challenges to patience and genuine love for others.

How do we meet these challenges? Our Lord brought His disciples together for a meaningful lesson about such things. We can certainly benefit if we join their group when the Master Teacher helps us to understand the nature of true greatness.

The Christian gets ahead, not in by being in front of others, but by taking a place where serving is top priority.

Basking in the limelight? Is that our style? No, very few of us want to be celebrities. Besides, that status is out of reach for most. Fame is not for us.

We are common folks. Most often we just want to be left alone and are quite comfortable not trying for greatness.

Being the private people that we are, fame not our thing, still even non-famous people like us do not escape Jesus' words, "*If anyone would be first*" (v 35).

This is more like us. Whether deserved or undeserved, none of us would turn down preferential treatment. Being moved to the front of the line, getting a better parking place or even getting a better deal than our neighbor. Getting ahead of others, taking precedence over others, pulling rank on others may be some kind of subliminal quest for greatness.

Jesus' disciples were coming off a letdown. In a village a few miles back, they had not been able to exorcise, cast out, a demon possessing a young boy. They were frustrated because our Lord had assigned them to heal the sick and to cast out demons (Mk 6:7–13). But for a much-afflicted boy, they were helpless. They couldn't get the job done. They were not as great as they thought they were.

Then, in walks Jesus. He salvaged the situation. By His great power, He drove away the demon. The Lord rescued the boy and restored him to his parents.

We heard about it in last Sunday's Gospel.

After that incident, Jesus went on with His disciples through the territory of Galilee.

They were on foot and small talk was common. These disciples could not easily move beyond their frustration and embarrassment in that recent village. Egos bruised and hurting, they could not cope with that letdown.

It was easier to think about something else, so they began to discuss who among them was the greatest. Who had done the most or the biggest things for Jesus

Their conversation started to take a wrong turn. Some distance into their journey, our Lord reminded them He was on another journey of servanthood. It was for real. Not many days ahead, the Son of Man would be delivered into the hands of men.

He would not resist, and they would kill Him. And when He was killed, after three days He would rise again (v 31).

This seems pretty blunt and the disciples did not understand. They were hesitant, and even a little scared to ask Jesus about the meaning of Him talking about the cross, suffering, and dying (cf. v 32).

Such a prediction of servanthood and trauma for Jesus should have toned down the disciples' bickering about their own greatness. And we should be a little embarrassed ourselves.

Baptized into Christ, we are linked by that Baptism to this very trauma, His serving us by suffering and death, as well as His rising again (cf. Rom 6:1–11). But servanthood may be farthest from our minds. We press ahead, our egos leading us to be first over others.

Arriving at Capernaum, settling probably at Peter's home, Jesus inquired, "*What were you discussing on the way?*" (v 33). Well now they were put on the spot. Their misguided arguing about greatness came out. We can understand their discussion. Even if we aren't seeking greatness or fame, still we strive to be first over others.

We know how it works. We know because nothing is more aggravating than being 5th in the line at the grocery store and the person in front has coupons.

We are annoyed when someone else is put ahead of us for almost any reason. We grumble, saying “Nice guys finish last,” because we want to finish first, we desire to be waited on, we want the promotion, the better pay, we want to advance. We want to be first.

Jesus used this as a teachable moment.

“If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all” (9:35). Stunned? Such a saying—taking last place, serving others—is contrary to everything our selfish world is about, a total reversal of dominant ideas of rank and greatness. How are we to get ahead, how can we progress, how can we win this way, serving all, and settling for last place in order to help others be first? How are we going to get to work on time pushing through crowded roads and streets, giving place to others? We shall be late, and we shall be last.

Our Lord was probably shaking His head in frustration. He had spoken about His own servanthood even unto death on the cross, and His disciples went on arguing who would be greatest among them. And we do not get it. We don’t catch on. And we have grown comfortable with getting ahead and being first always.

The Lord’s disciples were not easily going to let go of their ego aspirations to greatness. They enjoyed the discussion, the argument. Jesus’ lesson was going nowhere.

And it seemed that they would never learn the discipline of proper love for their neighbor, arguing themselves into positions of greatness.

The disciples needed a lesson, a clear lesson, an object lesson.

A child comes running through the room. Jesus picks him up and sets him in the middle of the disciples, puts His arm around the child, and says to His foolish disciples, “*Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me*” (v 37).

Did Jesus finally get their attention? Whoever receives, listens, and serves a little child, says Jesus, serves me, and the heavenly Father who sent me.

The child is Jesus’ object for learning the lesson of true greatness, becoming last and the servant of all. The child is ordinary. He has needs and wants. And once you do for him what needs to be done, once you serve him, will he ever repay or return the favor? No! As soon as you take care of him and his feet hit the floor again, more than likely, he’ll never give it another thought. And there you are—having worked, provided, given, you get no thanks even though you put him first and yourself last. But Jesus said that the person who does just this for a child honors Him and our heavenly Father who sent Him (v 37).

We learn that the only proper way to be first is to step back and be last, and from that lowly posture, serve others in everything we do. Becoming first by serving from a position of last is the very structure of the new world our Lord brought to pass when He descended so very low, even to death on the cross,

shedding the brilliance of the light of the glory of heaven, setting aside all of His power, to assume the form of a servant, the Suffering Servant, reshaping the entire fabric of life on earth, transforming it from selfish ambition to selfless serving and giving.

During the ongoing construction on Interstate 35, some drivers take unfair advantage of the inconvenience and pushed other drivers around. Some give in to road rage. But quite often, I saw and continue to see many people slowing down, pausing to let the other driver have place, and were last in order to help others be first and get on their way. Not just roadways, but every avenue of life in our communities, at the workplace, at our churches, in our homes, is opportunity to gather before Jesus and hear His words, "*If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all*" (v 35). It is the way to live, the way to win, the way to truly be first.

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus!

Amen.

S. D. G - Soli Deo Gloria

To God alone be glory

Greatness

Mark 9:30-37

1. We may not want to be famous, but we still would like to be first.
2. We understand the disciples' discussion, because the thought of greatness is on our minds too.
3. But Jesus teaches us true greatness by example.