

First Trinity Lutheran
Mark 9: 30-37
September 23, 2012

Putting Others First

Our Gospel lesson today begin with Jesus imparting a crucial teaching to his apostles and this is not the first time he has share this teaching with them. Jesus tells them that he is the Son of Man and that he will be killed and three days later will rise again. The prospect of the Messiah being taken and killed did not make any sense and as a result the disciples did not understand what he was saying. Why should the Son of God to suffer and die?

We read that the disciples did not ask Jesus to explain himself. Why? Maybe they didn't want to appear as confused or as clueless as they are. Maybe this word is so deep that they fear addressing it. In our time no one wants to look clueless or confused. I remember in High School geometry class, a subject that I didn't quite master, I tried to come off to the teacher that I understood even as the subject got more complicated I didn't have a clue. I faked it because it didn't want my friends to think that I was dumb. Maybe there was a time in your life when you had a similar experience.

When it comes to the spiritual realm and the role God plays, the world's deepest mysteries of life do indeed elude us. Questions like why do good people suffer, why are humans so brutal to one another. Why does evil succeed? If God's own son is betrayed and killed then maybe no one is safe. Why did God set up a world like this?

Look what happened to the disciples when they sidestep the real questions, they are afraid to ask, they turn and argue with each other squabbling among themselves over petty uses of rank and status? Maybe they were afraid to ask Jesus what he meant because their burning question was not, how can I better understand who Jesus is and

live out his mission in my life, but rather How can I be the greatest? How would life be different if we would forget trying to be great and pursue life as a disciple of Jesus?

This conversation about who is the greatest must have taken place out of earshot of Jesus because he asks them what they were talking about. Now Mark tells us that they didn't answer Him. Why? Because they were ashamed? Because they were embarrassed? Because Jesus would have gotten mad at them? If they had been discussing how to have a better prayer life, or how to serve God better, they would have been eager to tell Jesus about that. They would have said, "Lord, we just had the greatest discussion! Now we know how to pray better, and now we know how to serve you more completely." They would have been anxious to tell Him about that. But they kept silent because they had argued about which of them was the greatest.

I have been wondering this week "How did this happen, anyway? Why were they arguing about who was the greatest?" Mark doesn't tell us, but may I suggest a possibility? Just before this argument about who was the greatest Peter, James and John had just come down from the Mount of Transfiguration. There they had seen Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah. They had even heard the voice of God Himself from the cloud saying, "This is My Son, whom I love. Listen to Him!" It had been a wonderful and inspiring experience. But as they were coming down Jesus had told Peter, James, and John not to tell anyone what they had seen until after His resurrection.

Now keeping a secret can be a tremendous burden. But it can also be an advantage, especially if you can figure out how to let people know that you know a secret without telling them the secret. Here is where I want us to use our imagination. The Bible doesn't mention it, but I can just imagine something like this happening. Peter, James and John are all excited, and maybe Peter says something like this, "That was the most wonderful thing that has ever happened in my life." James adds, "For me, too. I've never

ever seen anything like that." And John chimes in, "I hope we can go back to that mountain soon, and see it again."

Now when the rest of the apostles heard them talking like that, can't you imagine their curiosity? "What are you talking about? What did you see?" Then Peter might have replied, "Well, we really can't say. Maybe someday we can tell you what we saw on top of the mountain, but right now Jesus only wants the 3 of us to know, and we've been instructed not to tell anybody else." If Peter really said something like that, then I can just hear Andrew responding, "You think you're pretty great, don't you? I'm the one who introduced you to Jesus in the first place. If it hadn't been for me you wouldn't even be here. You're not nearly as important as you think you are." Maybe Simon the Zealot said, "Well, wait a minute now. It's my enthusiasm that keeps this group going. The rest of you would have given up a long time ago if it weren't for me." One right after another they must have all proclaimed their own greatness.

Amazingly enough, they thought that Jesus didn't know what they were discussing. But He knew what was in their hearts even though they didn't answer His question, when he asks them what they were talking about. So He begins to talk about greatness. Jesus has his disciples sit down and he says "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all." Notice that Jesus did not condemn them or rebuke them for desiring greatness. He did not say that it is wrong to want to be great. He did not say that it is wrong to want to succeed. Jesus doesn't say that's wrong. But He defines what "greatness" is. What is "greatness?" "True greatness is to be found in service, in a concern about others, willing even to be last, instead of always putting yourself first."

This is contrary to everything the world teaches. The world says that greatness is measured by the number of lives that you control or how much you have. But Jesus

says that true greatness is measured by how many people you help - how many people you serve along the way. If we're really serious about being Christians we'll have to do some changing in our thinking. Being a Christian will change the way we look at our jobs, and at one another. It will change the way we view society. It will change the relationships between husbands and wives, children and parents.

Jesus wants to make his point and to do that he calls a child over to Him, and puts His arm around the child and says, "If you really want to be great, here is what you do. Welcome one of these little children in my name, and when you do that you're welcoming me. And not just me but the One who sent me." Now why did Jesus use a child as his object lesson? Maybe Jesus used a child because a child really can't do anything for us." A child can't enhance our position in society. A child can't add to our success. On the contrary, a child demands things. Every mother and father here knows that when we become parents we begin to learn what "serving" is all about. We quickly learn about sacrificing ourselves, our time, and our energy to meet the needs of our child. The moment we become a parent we start giving and giving and giving. When they become 18 we still give, and when they become 20 we give some more. And when they get married we find ourselves still giving.

So Jesus took the child and said, "This is what I'm talking about. A child can't do anything for you. A child can't make you more important in the eyes of the world. But a child can teach you what ministry is all about."

Being number one in God's kingdom is not about conquering or overcoming another. It's about putting others first. Amen