

18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost B 22 September 2024

Mark 9:30-37

St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth

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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

*[Jesus says], 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.'* Let's pray: ...

Who used to say, "I am the greatest!?" (Muhammad Ali, born Cassius Marcellus Clay).

Nicknamed "the Greatest", Muhammad Ali, the heavyweight boxing champion from the 1960's and 70's, left no-one guessing how good he thought he was. And it seems that from our gospel reading for today, the disciples think it's something worth contesting as well. And yet, their attitude in light of what Jesus has just told them about himself is somewhat self-indulgent, don't you think?

As they walking along, Jesus drops an absolute clanger, 'The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again' (Mark 9:31).

Now, you'd think that this would stop the disciples dead in their tracks and demand an explanation: "Whoa, Lord! What are you talking about? What do you mean, 'The Son of Man is to be betrayed?' Betrayed by whom? Why? What's this all about?"

According to St Mark, they just kept walking, as if he'd said something innocuous like, "Look at the pretty butterfly." Jesus tells them that he'll soon be arrested and crucified, and the next thing we're told is, "Then they came to Capernaum..." (Mark 9:33).

So, what's up with these disciples? Mark says they were afraid to ask, but I think there's more to it than that. Just look at the next verse. It's right there: They were too wrapped up in their own sense of importance. Mark says, "Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?' But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest" (Mark 9:33-34).

The disciples overlooked one of the most significant moments in history because they were wrapped up in their own self-importance. They wanted to know which one of them would be greatest in the kingdom of God. So, this is what I hope you'll get out of the sermon today: The greatest people in the kingdom of God aren't the rich and powerful, but the weak and powerless; not the ones with the most servants, but the ones who serve others the most. To make his point, Jesus took a child and held it in his arms and said, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me'" (Mark 9:37).

Later on in Mark we hear more about the disciples still missing the point when they chastise children, which evokes a strong, emotional response from Jesus: "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.' And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them" (Mark 10:13-16; Matthew 19:13-15; Luke 18:15-17).

On the surface, it sounds touching and sentimental, like a politician kissing babies. But Jesus is in fact, deeply serious and focused here. Often when children are mentioned in the Bible, they're lumped together with the women, cattle and foreigners – the brutal reality, those close to the bottom of the food chain. Instead, Jesus elevates children to the highest honour: "To receive a child is to receive me," he says. "Allow the children to come to me. Don't stop them... those who wish to enter God's kingdom must trust; be dependent, like a little child."

In Jesus' day, children were powerless. They had no rights or legal standing. They were totally dependent on their parents to provide for them and protect them. They were totally subject to the authority of others. Yet, Jesus says, "If you want to be a part of the kingdom of God, trust like a little child." So, what does this tell us about the value system of this world in which we live?

First, it tells us that it's not what we have, but who we are, that's precious to God. The world values material wealth, and the more you have, the better. "The one with the most toys wins!" That's the mindset, isn't it? People are constantly looking over their shoulders and comparing what they have with others. We call it, "Keeping up with the Joneses." All the while, ignoring what Jesus teaches us about the nature of God's kingdom.

In God's kingdom, the widow's single mite is greater than the riches of the wealthy and in the final judgement, a lowly beggar like Lazarus will sit at the heavenly banquet while a wealthy miser will look on from the torment of Hades. We hear of God who loves us with unconditional, unending love ... so that the one sheep who is lost is more precious than the ninety-nine who are safe in the fold; a repentant sinner is praised over a self-righteous Pharisee, and not a single sparrow falls to the earth without grieving our heavenly Father.

We need to hear this, Saints, because the world mocks Christians. We're treated as though we're ignorant, lack education and knowledge, aren't in touch with reality and "progressive" trends. Sadly, that causes some to question whether they have enough faith, worry about whether they do enough good works, and doubt their righteousness before God. Yet, in the face of such pressure Jesus says, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls..." (Matthew 11:28-30).

What's important to God is who we are; not, what we have to offer – or what we lack. He wants us to rely on his strength, not our own. We must accept living with the paradox St Paul discovered in his own life when the Lord said to him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for [my] power is made perfect in weakness." To which Paul responded, "So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

It's also helpful to re-familiarise yourself with those with childlike trust like Samuel (1 Samuel 3), David (1 Samuel 17), Solomon, (1 Kings 3:7), the child who gave his lunch to Jesus which Jesus blessed and fed a multitude (John 6 [:9]). And remember, Jesus himself came to earth not as a gallant warrior, but as a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths.

Saints, it's not our strength that's important, but the power of God's Spirit working in us. It's not our ability, but our availability that counts; our willingness to let God use us as instruments of his grace and love.

The greatest in the kingdom aren't the rich and the powerful, the strong and the capable, the independent and the resourceful; the greatest in the kingdom are those who know their limitations and are willing to lean into, trust, depend on - the love of Almighty God.

If I were asked to nominate those I consider as some of the greatest in the kingdom, I'd nominate the recipients of our Church's highest honour, the *Servant of Christ Award*.

These are the people who have left an indelible impression, not because they have a lot of money, or because they're charming or tall, dark and handsome, or because they're politically astute; but because they are children of God who rely on God to lead the way and give them what they need to succeed. Their weakness is their strength, and their humility stands as a lasting testimony.

Saints, trust in Jesus like a little child and claim your place of honour in God's kingdom. Free yourself of earthly concerns, lift your eyes to heaven, and be at peace knowing that you are honoured among the greatest the world will ever know. All glory be to God. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus, who is the greatest. Amen.