



Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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October 4, 2009

18th Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 9:30-37

Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Numbers 12:1-15

Psalm of the Day: Psalm 31

Second Lesson: James 3:13-18

Gospel: Mark 9:30-37

Get a Grip on Kingdom Greatness

What makes Jesus great?

What makes his followers great?

Did you ever have it happen to you when you were a child, that you got caught doing something you weren't supposed to be doing? And Mom and Dad called you on the carpet for doing it. Maybe you were talking when someone else was talking and not paying any attention at all? I think it's ironic that Jesus is talking to his disciples about not talking when they were supposed to be teaching and watching children doing the same thing at this moment.

Have you ever had that moment when your parents caught you doing something you weren't supposed to do, and you couldn't deny it? You had to just stand there and take it. You probably didn't raise your eyes and look at them. You probably just shifted back and forth, one foot to the other. But you couldn't lift up your eyes and look at them because you knew you were doing something you weren't supposed to do, and you knew that they knew it.

Take that situation you might have experienced in your own life, multiply it by at least 12 and you have what occurred in the Gospel that I just read to you from Mark 9. The disciples in the house, probably getting ready for a meal, maybe talking about what they are going to eat or what they are going to do or what they are going to enjoy, and Jesus drops the bomb on them. "What were you talking about on the road?" They couldn't say a word because they were arguing among themselves about which of them was the greatest. They were so full of themselves that they had to debate it with each other saying, "I'm better." "No I'm better." As they walked when Jesus was trying to isolate them and teach them because his impending death and resurrection were coming and he wanted them ready for it. But they had other things on their minds and they couldn't be troubled with such things. Besides, they didn't understand it, so if you don't understand it, why bother listening to it. It must be much more entertaining just to sit and talk to the person next to you than to actually pay attention. So that's what they were caught doing.

It's kind of a sad thing, but it's an indication of our own sinful nature that when our God reaches out to us with the greatest message that there could possibly be, we find other things to talk about, especially ourselves. But it shouldn't surprise us in the apostles because it's something we see and we experience every day ourselves.

That's why this lesson that Jesus teaches his followers on that day is an important lesson for us also, so that we get a grip on kingdom greatness. That kingdom greatness is not about us. It's about what makes Jesus great. And what makes his followers great is not themselves, but focusing on Jesus.

Last week we looked at Mark 8 and we had the same thing – Jesus talking to his disciples about his upcoming suffering and death – and they didn't get it there either. In between that and what I just read to you from Mark 9, an account had taken place that you are probably familiar with – the Transfiguration of Jesus. He had taken Peter, James and John up on the mountain. He had revealed his full glory to them. Peter and the others saw Elijah and Moses standing there talking to Jesus as they see him in his full glory. They were talking there also about his suffering and death, but evidently that didn't sink into those three because I have to believe one of the reasons they are arguing about who is the greatest is because Jesus had given those three that special blessing of seeing him in his full glory. And now perhaps they are saying, "We must be more important than you are because we got to go do that. We are also the ones that got to go in there when Jairus' daughter was raised from the dead. That wasn't you guys. That was us three. We must be more important than you are. We must be greater."

Or maybe there was jealousy and envy on the part of the other nine, I don't know. But can I understand that when God gives a special blessing to someone else, at times Christians respond by being envious and jealous and bitter towards that person that has been blessed? Sure. That's a life experience we've probably had, right?

That's kind of how Satan works. He takes blessings that God gives us and tries to turn them into something that can separate us from God. That's certainly what was happening on that day. The Twelve were arguing about who was the greatest. Jesus was trying to tell them, "I'm about to die. I'm going to rise again. You are going to be the witnesses to these things, so you guys have to pay attention so you know what you are talking about." But they are too busy looking at themselves, thinking about themselves and being concerned about themselves.

Some things never change. Almost 2,000 years later, you and I are the same way. That's what makes Jesus great. In spite of the fact that he is getting away from the crowds just so that he can teach his disciples, his disciples don't know what he is talking about but they are too scared to admit that they don't get it. They are too afraid to admit there's something they don't know, so they don't ask him about it. They suffer because of it because they don't grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, as God has commanded us to do.

Do we ever do the same thing? Do we ever cheat ourselves of some of God's comfort and some of God's blessings because we think we know it all and we don't need to learn anymore? If we do, we are fools. What makes Jesus great is that he loved us and died for us in spite of all the times he knew that we would, as was said in our First

Lesson, spit in his face. We have figuratively done that over and over when we put ourselves ahead of him. We do it daily where our ideas, our wants and our needs supersede what God has said is his will for our lives. We do it over and over. We think we know better. We want to serve God, not as a servant, but as an adviser. Our prayer life at times becomes, "God, why aren't you doing this, this and this? And here's what I think you ought to do?" Then to give the appearance of humility, we tack on, "Not my will but your will be done quickly." But in our heart of hearts, we are still just telling God what he should be doing.

What makes God great, what makes Jesus great is that he was willing to carry the cross and die for our sins even though we would have more important things to do than to listen to his Word and grow in grace and knowledge, that we would have more important things to do than to serve him faithfully, that we would have more important things to do than love him above everything else because we'd be too busy loving ourselves.

The patience of our God is amazing. The love of our God is incredible. It is not an emotion. It is an act of will. By his desire and his determination, he lives and dies in our place even though there is nothing in us that would make him fall in love with us. He does it because he is a loving God. And the Son faithfully carries out the Father's will to the bitter end. He lives in our place perfectly because we can't and we don't and we won't. Then he dies on the cross in our place so that we'll never have to face the agony of hell. That's what makes Jesus great, not an earthly messiah, not something of this world, but he opens heaven's gates to us. That's what we always need to keep in mind as we face the struggles and the difficulties of this life.

God's greatest gift to us is not to take away our struggles and our difficulties. God's greatest gift to us is that he has opened heaven to us who do not deserve it. You and I need to lift our eyes above the here and now and focus on what only his Spirit enables us to see. That is the hereafter.

Then we will find the strength, the resolve and the ability to be great in his kingdom. What makes people great in his kingdom is not living to serve self, but being willing to serve others, like Jesus showed his disciples. Can you imagine how their faces were reddening as Jesus had asked them this question and now nothing is being said and he is getting a little child to come stand among them? Then he takes this little child and picks it up. Do you think they know they are about to get rebuked? Do you think there is a little warmth coming off their cheeks because they were busted and now they are about to be admonished?

He tells them by a very visual lesson that being great in the kingdom of God is not about being considered great. Being great is about doing great things. And the great things that you and I are privileged to do at times are very simple in the eyes of the world. Jesus said "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me. If you want to be great, welcome people in my name and welcome me because by doing so, you also welcome the One who sent me."

Welcoming a little child? That doesn't sound like something that the disciples thought would be sitting on his right or on his left when the kingdom is established? But welcoming a child "in his name" implies a couple of things. First of all, it implies spiritual blessings, to serve people with the greatest thing that we can serve them with. To be truly great in the kingdom means that we teach them what "in the name of Jesus" means. It is the name above every name. The only name given by which we might be saved. But it also means to act out of love for that name that has saved us and at times, to serve each other physically. To do the little things just because we love God, to actually do whatever you do to the glory of God, as 1 Corinthians says.

Again, you and I aren't always good at that. We sometimes fall into this way of thinking that it's all about how other people should be serving us. An example that I see in my life at times is that I think the Lord gave me five kids just so that four of them could look for the remote control for me when I can't find it, and that they are there to take care of me and my needs, however petty they might be at times. But true greatness in the kingdom would be looking to see how I can serve my children, my family, my wife, and how I can serve others and not how others can serve me. That's the nature of true greatness – to be willing to humble yourself to the point of serving those we would consider the least among us.

Think of how Jesus had to drive this point home again and again as he approached the cross. How even on the night he was betrayed he had to get down, squat down or get on his knees in front of his disciples, and wash their feet to give them another visual example that greatness in the kingdom is about serving others. It's not all about us.

Our sinful nature certainly is going to want to make it all about us. And when that happens, what you and I need to do is simply say, "Lord, forgive me. I have sinned again in my selfishness and my pride. Forgive me and take away this sin. Wash me clean in the blood of Jesus and now, Lord, give me the strength and the desire, the will, and the determination love others by serving others." That's what he has called us to do.

That's greatness in the kingdom of God.