**Mark 9:30-37** October 3, 2021

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*Mark 9:30 They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, 31because he was teaching his disciples. He said to them, “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.” 32But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.*

*33They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the road?” 34But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.*

*35Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, “Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.” 36He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, 37“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.”*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**Serve – The Way Jesus Served**

We have that phrase, “Being embarrassed for someone.” Like when someone says something stupid and everyone in room knows it—everyone except that person. If you know the person well, part of the embarrassment is because when they say something not real smart, you feel like you get painted as not real smart too. You love ’em, but…

Welcome to Jesus’ life. I don’t know how he put up with it. He had given up heaven. He had lowered himself to suffering, to poverty, to being persecuted, all the while knowing that a horrific and tortured execution waited at the end. He had the sins of the world on his back, the frustration of people refusing the help he offered, help they needed. He assisted all who came to him. He worked himself to exhaustion. And there in tow behind him are the Twelve, his twelve ambassadors, his presidential cabinet. Like over-paid entertainers they are feuding about which of them is the best and the greatest. They are dis-respecting each other, exaggerating their virtues, and ignoring glaring faults.

This was an ongoing problem with Jesus’ disciples. The Gospels record at least three different times that Jesus’ disciples argued about which of them was the greatest. They even argued about this stuff in the middle of Jesus’ last meal with them. Right there, as their teacher was staring death in the face, they got all worked up and argued about who is the greatest, (Luke 22:24).

But back to this day on the road up in Galilee. How embarrassing for Jesus. Not just that they were embarrassing themselves, but they were also bringing disrepute to him. His followers looked like everyone else out there, biting and scratching to get ahead. But should we have expected different?

It’s a lesson we learn early. Contrary to what Jesus said, the message we are taught from youth is that the meek do *not* inherit the earth. We are told, the squeaky wheel get’s the grease. You’ve got to promote yourself to get the promotion. We start getting graded at a very young age, and it becomes the way the world measures us from from gradeschool well into our working lives. Not all these things are bad in their place. But the self-promoting mindset of these arguing disciples is a mindset nurtured by the world we live in. The selfish sinful nature inside us loves it! Jesus’ disciples were doing what came naturally.

So what was Jesus going to do? Watch him. Jesus did not publicly rebuke his disciples. He would confront them, but he would not shame them. Jesus did not stop in the road and give them a tongue lashing with the everpresent crowds watching. Jesus wasn’t into humiliating people. He would address the issue in its time—which would come soon enough.

That same afternoon Jesus and his disciples walked into Capernaum and stepped into Jesus’ base of operations, probably the house of one of the Twelve. The time was right. ***“When [Jesus] was in the house, he asked them, ‘What were you arguing about on the road?’”*** Jesus knew. How would they answer his searching question and gaze?

As he watched them, he saw something that warmed his heart. They couldn’t talk about it. Which was exactly the right answer. They were embarrassed! They realized their conduct was unbefitting a follower of Jesus. You have to love these Twelve, don’t you? Jesus did. Through all their flaws, he saw teachable hearts. So Jesus doesn’t chew them out, up one side and down the other. He sits down and teaches.

It’s just one more reason we love our Savior. He deals with us so mercifully. He addresses our wrongs, our sins, but with only as much rebuke as is needed. And as soon as we realize the error of our ways and come to him in repentance, Jesus relents. The harsh message of the Law stops, and he rushes to assure and comfort us with the message of forgiveness, the Gospel. How wonderful to know that Jesus isn’t into cancel culture. He doesn’t dredge up our past and say that we have forever disqualitified ourselves, that our names need to be ritually dragged through the mud every time we open our mouths, that we have no place in his kingdom. He deals with us so tenderly, as we wish all would!

Then Jesus gently led them down another path. He taught these open hearts to be more humble than they were. They needed to be humble not only around their great Rabbi and Lord, but humble also around people who were less than them. It would be an honor to serve one greater than us. If the president (and here I am not going to argue about politics, just choose your favorite president of the last forty years, whether Reagan, Clinton, Bush, Obama, Trump or Biden) whoever your favorite is, wouldn’t you love to serve him, to do something for him even if it cost you time and money? Wouldn’t you talk about it till your dying day? But that isn’t the sort of service Jesus had in mind. Service offered to those greater than us is only proper!

***“Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, ‘If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and servant of all.’”*** Jesus assumed the position of the Jewish teacher; he sat down. From the teacher’s chair he taught humility. Not that we fall all over ourselves in some sort of hypocritical show of humility. The sort of humility that loves to hear people say, “Look at him. He’s so humble!” Jesus speaks of true humility, humility not only of words, but actions and attitudes.

Next, Jesus called a child. Now, we really need to watch to understand Jesus’ point here. Reflexively, we think that the point of Jesus bringing this child into the discussion is to tell us to be humble like little chilren. In another place, Jesus *did* teach his people to be humble like little children. But here, if we listen carefully, we will hear Jesus making a rather different point.

First thing you have to do is set aside some our way of looking at things, and try to understand a different culture. In that ancient society, a child was counted as having a very low status in socitey. Theirs was not a time when parents structured their schedules around their kids’ schedules, putting themselves out to take them to athletic events, drama productions and the like. Maybe you are old enough to remember something similar. Maybe you remember a mom shooing you out the door after lunch and hoping you wouldn’t come back until supper. The culture around Jesus was not a kid-centered world. It’s not that they didn’t love their children, just like your mother didn’t not love you when she shooed you out the door and didn’t want to see you for six hours. But for the adults of that world, that time, life was about just surviving. Life without cars to take you places, without tractors to plow your fields, without machines to wash your clothes or dishes—it was hard. Kids were loved, dearly loved, but people needed to survive, and you couldn’t survive by spending your entire Saturday watching soccer matches. When put on the rungs of the social hierarchy, children were very low. I’m not saying this is right or wrong, better or worse. I am just trying to help you see what the disciples saw when Jesus called a little child into their midst.

So when Jesus brought this little child into the middle of his disciples, he brought in someone at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Jesus didn’t want Peter, James, John and the rest to be humble like this child, and thus find their greatness. Instead you search for greatness by going to the lowest rung on the ladder, and then even a rung lower, *serving* the lowest. That’s greatness in God’s kingdom!

Being the greatest isn’t about being an apostle or a disciple or a pastor. Being the greatest isn’t about accomplishments, wealth, promotions, championships, or even about being poor and outcast. It is about what Jesus was doing: serving. Serving the least member of the community. Service offered to those greater than us is what is due to them! Service to the lowest, who should maybe even be serving us, that is God-pleasing. Serve those who have nothing to offer you. Don’t look down on those who annoy you, look up to them. Be servants to those who drive vehicles you would be embarrassed to drive. That is the service that our Father in heaven desires.

The marks of God-honoring service that Jesus was teaching to his disciples are laid out in our Epistle reading from James: *“The wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.”*

The family of Christ is not a part of the dog-eat-dog world. It is something totally different. If people want to portray the way of Christ as wimpy, as the way of losers, as who knows what, let them. We are judged not by people, but by God.

But how can you do this? How can one stand to be considerate when so many are rude? How can you be peace-loving when so many are spoiling for an argument? How you be submissive, when people will lord it over you and take advantage of you? How?

So far I have ignored the first part of our reading. I have ignored it almost as much as the Twelve ignored it. Right before their quarrel, but still part of our reading, Jesus had told his disciples, ***“The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.”*** The Holy Spirit had these two events put next to each other in the Gospel of Mark for a reason. He contrasts our Savior’s perfect attitude, perfect life and death, to the self-centered disciples. And we know where we fit into that picture!

The only way can even begin to get this right is to remember Jesus. Whenever we forget how badly we needed Jesus to do what he did for us, we start getting cocky. But when we keep our humble Savior before our eyes, we start to do what Jesus commends in verse 37, ***“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.”*** We start to put into practice verse 35, ***“If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.”*** ***“Last”*** means that we let someone in line in front of us, only to find out that he got the last ticket and there is none for us. But that’s okay. ***“Servant”*** means not getting what you want because you are so busy helping others get what they need. That’s what servants do. And you don’t always get thanked. And sometimes you lose out. And sometimes you miss chances that never come round again.

And you know what? For Christians that is okay, because we are not in a competition to be the greatest. And while we might want to be more humble like Jesus, that really isn’t the point of it either. The point is simply that we want to tell him, “Thank you.” Amen.