

The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

October 11, 2009

Amazing Grace Lutheran Church - Pastor Chip Wilke

Mark 9:30-37

They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, because he was teaching his disciples. He said to them, "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." But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it. They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?" But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all." He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, "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." (NIV)

When the boxer Muhammad Ali was in his prime he was happy to tell anyone within earshot of him: *"I am the greatest."* When baseball player Rickey Henderson broke Lou Brock's stolen base record he proudly lifted the base above his head and proclaimed: *"I am the greatest."* Rulers, czars, and conquerors of the past either have given themselves the title of or have been labeled by others as great because of their achievements. Peter *"the Great"* and Alexander *"the Great"* are just a couple that come to mind. What makes someone great? In the eyes of the world and even for us we think of greatness in titles, & accomplishments, & power, & the ability to dominate and be the best at something. We see Jesus' own disciples had the same idea about greatness.

But what makes someone great in the eyes of God? What is true greatness in God's kingdom? The disciples, like we often do, needed to be straightened out in their ideas about greatness by their Savior and Teacher. Like the disciples, we need to hear what Jesus has to say about what makes someone great. So I pray we listen up today as God gives us a lesson where **Jesus shows us true greatness.**

The words of our text come shortly after Jesus had taken Peter, James, and John up the mountain of transfiguration where he showed them a glimpse of His greatness & glory as God. Jesus again just revealed His power & greatness by driving out an evil spirit that had been tormenting a young boy. After this event, we are told Jesus and his disciples *"left that place and passed through Galilee."* *Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, because he was teaching his disciples."*

Jesus uses some of the precious time He had left on earth to teach His chosen disciples - to show them where His true greatness will be found. His most important work was fast approaching. Earlier Jesus spoke plainly to them about it saying that the: *"Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again."* But this important message appeared to fall on deaf ears. Peter even rebuked Jesus for saying such things. So now Jesus tells them once again: *"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."*

Although Jesus alluded to it earlier, the new information Jesus adds is His betrayal. Someone close to Him will turn their back on Him and hand Him over to His enemies. Again Jesus reveals the heart and soul of the gospel - His suffering, death, and resurrection for all people - the things that really make Jesus great in our eyes & hearts. But once again the disciples reaction is disappointing. ***“But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.”*** They confessed Jesus as the Christ - the Holy One of God. They saw His greatness in His glory and power in His miracles. They believed in Him as the Messiah, but they still misunderstood what exactly would make Him such a great Messiah. They were looking for a king to rule with His power and wear a crown of gold. They didn't see greatness in suffering and wearing a crown of thorns. How could Jesus be a great and glorious Messiah & King and face rejection, betrayal, and death?

They are even afraid to ask Jesus about it. Maybe it was because Jesus said one close to Him would betray Him. Maybe it was because the last time when Peter objected to this teaching Jesus rebuked Peter saying: ***“Get behind me, Satan! You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men”***(Mark 8). Maybe they were in denial that these terrible things could really happen to their dear friend Jesus whom they came to know, love, and follow for the last couple of years. They didn't understand what Jesus meant and for whatever reason they were to afraid to ask Jesus.

So pushing these thoughts out of their minds the disciples started debating about something else. They ***“had argued about who was the greatest.”*** When they get to Capernaum (a city right on the sea of Galilee and the home of Peter & Andrew), Jesus asks them, ***“What were you arguing about on the road?”*** The accounts in Matthew and Luke fill in some of the details. At first, the disciples are quiet and keep silent. But when they get up the nerve they come to Jesus and ask, ***“Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”*** (Matt. 18) Certainly, they thought some deserved higher positions than others. After all, Jesus only took three of them with Him at certain times. It was Peter who was commended for his confession of faith. To them it is a logical question.

But think about this. Jesus just told about the horrible suffering in front on Him, that He was about to sacrifice Himself for them and the rest of the world - and they are arguing over who deserves more than the next guy - who is the greatest! Isn't that just like us and our sinful selfish nature? Even in God's church we can make things all about us and a competition and bickering about who deserves more. Jesus' answer is intended to shock His disciples just a bit. ***“Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, ‘If anyone wants to be first, he must be very last, the servant of all.’*** Jesus says ***“to be first you must be last.”*** True greatness in God's kingdom is not in deeds that draw outward attention to yourself, but in humble service for others. Greatness is being a servant of all simply out of thankfulness for God's grace.

Imagine being part of an audience told that behind the curtain was someone great - a true example of greatness. When the curtain is opened we would expect someone like Brett Favre, or a President or Bill Gates but imagine that instead there is a little child no one knows. Now think of the object lesson Jesus gives His disciples. They ask ***“who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”*** So Jesus goes and He brings them a little child. Can you picture this? Imagine Jesus taking a little child to them, holding the child in His arms then saying to His disciples as Matthew records: ***“I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”***

Therefore whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

To be great in God’s eyes they needed to become like children. Do you see Jesus’ point? This summer the one time I went to the pool all I had to do is hold out my arms and my little Rachel just jumped - no questions asked. A couple of times I did not think I was going to make it over the edge of the pool and get into position to catch her in time because she was just ready to jump. She trusted that I would catch her every time & that she would be safe in my arms. That is greatness in the eyes of God - a child who trusts. Jesus is looking for that child-like faith that jumps - complete trust that totally looks to Him - His life as mine, His death as the payment for my sins, His resurrection as my only assurance that my sins are actually paid in full. Jesus teaches His disciples that greatness is not looking at their own deeds and accomplishment or relying on themselves - that will never get them into God’s kingdom at all. Instead, if they want to find greatness they need to run like little trusting children into Jesus’ saving arms.

Jesus continues to show His disciples His definition of true greatness: ***“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.”*** Notice what God sees as great. He doesn’t point to dynamic preachers who can attract large crowds. He doesn’t use an example of those who can cast out demons and perform mighty miracles. This is Jesus’ idea of greatness - welcoming a little child in His name. Bringing a little child to Jesus in baptism. Taking the time to teach a child the truths about Jesus’ love and forgiveness. By welcoming a child we welcome Jesus. More than that, Jesus says we welcome the one who sent Him, our Father in heaven.

Do you see how Jesus turns our ideas of greatness completely around? Jesus didn’t come to earth and walk around thumping His chest saying: ***“I am the greatest.”*** But Jesus is, isn’t He? Jesus is the greatest not because of His titles or power, but because Jesus is the servant of all. Jesus came to serve and give up His life on a cross as a ransom for all. The disciples later would see that Jesus’ true greatness was in His betrayal, rejection, suffering, death, and resurrection. Jesus also sets us straight. True greatness in God’s eyes and in God’s kingdom is found in loving service. May we humbly serve Him who loved us and gave Himself for us. May we gladly serve others with the love our Savior has shown to us. May we welcome all, down to the youngest and smallest children, in Jesus’ name. Greatness in the eyes of the world may be one thing, but how much better it is my friends to be great in God’s eyes! Jesus shows us true greatness. Amen.