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St. John's Lutheran Church of Burlington
22 September 2024

Sermon on Mark 9:30-37

Worship Theme:

FOLLOWERS OF CHRIST ARE HUMBLE SERVANTS

Humility and pride are polar opposites. Pride exalts self at the expense of God and others. Humility exalts God and others at the expense of self. As we see all Christ did to serve us, our hearts melt. Within us grows a Christ-like obsession to serve others, without counting the cost, without any desire to be repaid. Those who are in positions of Christian leadership understand that their leadership can only be achieved through service. For followers of Christ are humble servants.

Sermon Theme: "True Greatness"

Grace, and mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen!

We love greatness. The greater something is, the more we find ourselves drawn to it! The most famous athletes have broken world records. The highest-paid actors have starred in box office record-breakers. The most adored musicians have topped the song charts for weeks. The most persuasive politicians gain the most supporters. The most popular influencers get the most likes and shares. We're naturally drawn to the richest, the most famous, the most respected, the coolest and trendiest. The greater someone is, the more likely we are to associate ourselves with them, because we not only adore greatness in others, but we long to have it for ourselves too. "Maybe if people know I like and support this person, they'll think I'm great too!" And so continues our quest for greatness in life. We want to win the sports trophy, get the job promotion, nail the music solo, make the ground-breaking discovery, create the viral video, and have all the people around us tell us we're wonderful and amazing, because we all want to be the greatest something!

Today in Mark 9, Jesus shows us this is not just a modern-day issue – his disciples struggled with it too! They got into a major discussion and argument about which of them was the greatest disciple. We might be tempted to look at this scene and think, "How foolish! These dumb disciples didn't realize how good they had it. I mean, they were literally walking around WITH GOD! They were chosen to be Jesus' inner circle of followers – what more did they want?!"

But think about it for a moment. A number of things likely led them to this point. They were citizens of God's holy nation, the one from which the Promised Messiah would come to save and deliver his people. That Messiah came during their lifetime! He handpicked THESE TWELVE GUYS to be his closest friends, his inner circle, the ones who would see and learn the most from him. What an honor; no wonder they felt great and important! Jesus specifically chose THEM!

It wasn't all butterflies and rainbows though. As they were walking around

with Jesus, feeling superior to pretty much everyone else, they couldn't help but notice something. A few of them had been singled out to attend a special event. Jesus' Transfiguration had happened very recently before this – the time when Jesus was on top of a mountain and for a brief moment unveiled his full glory as God, shining brighter than the sun and talking with Moses and Elijah, some of the greatest leaders of God's people of old. It was one of the most amazing and unbelievable things that had ever been witnessed by people! But there weren't twelve men there to witness it; there were only three – Peter, James, and John.

Suddenly it's not so crazy anymore that a conversation began about which of them was greatest. They all felt great and important just by being Jesus' disciples, but feelings of inequality were rapidly forming among them, and that needed to be solved. Cue the discussion and argument.

What about us though? Surely God's people in 2024 don't struggle with the same problem of desiring to be greater, do we? As much as we wish that were true, we know better. Remember what we just said? Most (if not all) of us in just the past few minutes shook our heads at the foolishness of Jesus' disciples and how they could possibly get caught up in such an argument. But do you realize what we did? That was us thinking we're greater than them. And our reasoning for it is that we would never worry about or think about who the greatest one of us is!

It doesn't stop there either though. Throughout our entire lives we play the comparison game. In our church, we want to be the best pastor, teacher, singer, musician, leader of this or that group, person who always knows where everything is and how everything works. In our home, we want to be the best husband or wife, mom or dad, the favorite child with the best toys, or the person who always has the cleanest house or tastiest food so that people compliment us whenever they come to visit. In our job, we want the most recognition and praise from the boss, the biggest wage increase, the envy and admiration of co-workers. We all want to be marked by people around us as greater than others, whatever the reason may be.

Where does that lead us though? Inevitably it will always lead us to the same place it led Jesus' disciples: silently shuffling our feet, heads down, embarrassed in front of our God, knowing we did something he didn't want us to, while he directly asks us what we did. *Jesus asked his disciples, "What were you arguing about on the road?" But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.* What would you have said to Jesus? I think I would be wishing I were anywhere else, or hoping to come up with a clever excuse and reason which would make Jesus say, "Oh no problem – what you did makes perfect sense!" But I would likely stand there just as speechless as the disciples, wishing I had made different choices because I certainly should have known better.

In those moments of shame and guilt, Jesus does for us exactly what we all need him to – he teaches a very important lesson about greatness: being great in the Kingdom of God is different than being great in the eyes of the world. The world almost always finds itself opposing God. To our fallen sinful world, God's wisdom is the most foolish thing imaginable as it watches him – the most powerful Being there ever has been and ever will be – choose to give up his almighty throne and

come to earth as a human being. And he didn't even come as a great one who could hang out with the rich and powerful and famous – the “great” people! No, God chose to be a poor carpenter from a humble town who spent his time with tax collectors, adulterers, criminals, the downcast, the poor, the blind, lame, deaf, mute, and sick – the people most looked down on and rejected by others. God lovingly looked upon all those people (all US people!!) and he chose to die an excruciatingly painful death on a cross to pay for every one of our sins. It doesn't make any sense to the way anyone in the world thinks – how could a God who chooses something like THAT be called great?!

But Jesus didn't come to be great by our standards. He came to be great by heaven's standards and to do the impossible: live not just greatly, but perfectly. He would do great miraculous things, and the world praised him for that! But when he turned down worldly power and wealth and kingdoms, they couldn't understand why. He told his disciples plainly, now for the second time, *“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.”* His whole great mission was to die. And before we point fingers at anyone who says that's the most insane thing they've ever heard, we have to admit our sinful natures agree completely. We can't fathom a “great” plan that ends in the death of God, at the hands of humans, for the sake of humans. *The disciples did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.*

So Jesus didn't just say it; he showed them and us what **true greatness** is. Philippians 2 explains how Jesus demonstrated heavenly greatness in the greatest way: *“He made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. He humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!”* For Jesus, that's what greatness meant. **True greatness was giving up HIS greatness to make US great instead.** Jesus was willing to be the very least of all so that we would be elevated before our Father in Heaven and given a new status as his holy children forever. By suffering and dying, Jesus set a place for you at heaven's banquet table. By exchanging his greatness for your sin, Jesus put your name on one of the many rooms in his Father's house. By his lowly death, he defeated death and robbed it of all its power. So many people fear death, but Christians never need to fear it. Death for us is simply passing from temporary life to eternal life! By taking the nature of a humble servant, Christ accomplished all these things for us, doing the very greatest thing anyone has ever done.

So what does this mean for us now? Jesus' disciples were too ashamed to admit they had been arguing about who was or should be the greatest among them. But Jesus knew their thoughts anyway, just as he knows ours. So he says, *“Anyone who wants to be first, must be the very last and the servant of all.”* Greatness in God's eyes doesn't mean sitting at the head table or parading ourselves and our actions around for everyone to see. It means loving one another even during the most difficult times. It means taking on what many might call “lowly duties” with a spirit of joy. It means submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Jesus placed a child among his disciples and said, *“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.” Jesus’ recipe for **true greatness** means no task is insignificant and no person unimportant. It means helping a child tie their shoe is just as great in God’s eyes as giving a fortune to church, sometimes even better. It is pretty unlikely that Jesus’ disciples would have looked to a child as the greatest of anything. So Jesus taught them and us the importance of humble faith in him rather than self-exalting faith in ourselves, because only faith in Jesus leads to willing humble service toward others. And by welcoming, loving, and serving others, we’re welcoming, loving, and serving God himself!

Jesus himself demonstrated this for us, teaching that those who are **truly great** are those who humbly serve. What a seemingly contradictory thought! So Jesus explains: the most-needy and underserving, the ones who will never be able to pay us back, the ones who will never help us become “great” in the world – these are the ones we get to welcome and serve in his name. He reminds us that this service is not something to be ashamed of, as if it were some terrible burden to bear. God has already done this for all of us, serving us by doing what we would never be able to do for ourselves. We would never have lived a perfect life, so God did for us. We could never have died a death worth enough to pay our sin-debt, so God did for us. We would never have done enough to earn our place in heaven’s eternal glory, so God did for us. See how greatly he loves us! And can we ever repay God for all this? Of course not! All we can do is take the love he has so freely given and let it motivate us to serve others out of love for them and thankfulness to him. Service for the sake of love rather than recognition or repayment – that’s **true greatness** in God’s Kingdom!

Dear friends, praise God for these beautiful truths he teaches us in his Word: that striving for greatness in the world will never result in lasting greatness; that Jesus willingly left his eternal greatness behind to humbly serve us as our Savior, living, dying, and rising in our place; that because Jesus has already done all this for us, we are now eternally great in God’s eyes, perfect, holy, and sinless before him; and that we his followers get to live thankful lives every day in his presence as we joyfully and willingly pass this humble service of love along to everyone we can.

Let’s pray:

Dear Jesus, you are God, the very greatest Being in existence. We confess that in our self-centered pride, we often do anything we can to be seen as great by everyone else around us. We thank you for forgiving our selfish quest for earthly greatness and for showing us what **true greatness** is with your choice to love and serve us every day. Help us to thank you for your priceless grace to us by reflecting your love to others through our humble service to them, wherever it may be, whatever it may be, and whoever they may be. For this great privilege and for all the blessings in our lives, we praise and thank you, now and forever. Amen!

And the peace of God which goes beyond all understanding will guard and keep our hearts and our minds through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.