

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 20B)

September 20, 2015

Text: Mark 9:30–37

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

You would have thought that after the disciples' failed to cast out a demon from a young boy, they would have realized that Jesus' mission and ministry was not going to follow a simple pattern of glory and easy victories, right and left. The Lord told them after this embarrassing debacle that such authority and ability can only come by prayer. Prayer is the activity of faith and absolute dependence, dependence upon Jesus that is. They've still got a ways to go.

At the beginning of today's reading, we find that Jesus has taken His disciples out of the limelight. They are traveling through Galilee, that northern region of Israel. But they're heading south to Jerusalem. This is the culminating journey to Palm Sunday, Good Friday, and Easter. The disciple must be prepared for what's coming. Vs. 31, Jesus said, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise."

Shockingly, Mark records (vs. 32) the disciples' response as a profound lack of understanding coupled with crippling fear to ask for clarification. This isn't the first time Jesus predicted his death and resurrection. In Mark 8:31, Jesus announces that He must suffer, be rejected, die and rise again. On that occasion, Peter spoke up and rebuked Jesus for talking of such things. Jesus in turn chastises Peter and calls him Satan. Peter would understand later, if Jesus doesn't go to Calvary, then the Devil wins and everything is eternally lost. For now, however, the subject of Jesus' death and resurrection was just too touchy to ask any questions. They don't understand and they are afraid to ask.

But you have to believe the disciples talked about it among themselves – without Jesus. And that's the problem. Cutting Jesus out of the loop is a sure fire recipe for disaster. People of God, we must beware of and repent of our natural inclination to be self-sufficient and independent from God. Yet again, Jesus teaches His Church, teachers you and me, that we need Jesus for everything.

Well, Jesus and the disciples return back to their home base at Capernaum (vs. 33). Surrounded by comfortable and familiar surroundings, the disciples begin to take stock of things. They've been following Jesus for about 3 years now. It's about time the chain of command is firmly established. According to vs. 34, the disciples had been arguing amongst themselves about who will be the greatest in God's kingdom. Can't you just imagine these grown men arguing who should be the leader under Jesus! Peter, James, and John just saw Jesus transfigured. Surely one of them should be the leader. We didn't fail to cast out the demon from the boy, one of them might have said. But the rest of you did. You get the point.

Jesus is teaching about His coming suffering and death that will establish the kingdom of God; the disciples are arguing about who will be the greatest. One is talking of loving sacrificial service; the others are talking of status, authority, and power. They couldn't be further apart from each other. James would describe such activity like this, "For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice" (3:16).

Jesus exposes their hearts and intentions. Vs. 35, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and servant of all." The exalted ones in the Church are those who are last and least. They are the ones who don't receive or desire recognition and glory. They are servants of God and men who value the things despised by the world and its thirst for power, recognition, and glory. The first ones are the last ones. The last ones are first, in God's kingdom.

This is what Jesus had been teaching them after their failure to cast out the demon, that God's kingdom is established in His suffering, death, and resurrection. Jesus will show that greatness comes through suffering most clearly on Good Friday. Only after our Lord gives Himself fully and completely as the final, perfect sacrifice in service to the world is He exalted. The cross first, resurrection later. This is the pattern set for the Church, for you and me and every Christian. This means the struggle against sin and temptation must be fought in faith today through the power of the Holy Spirit before the final victory comes on the Last Day. Our day of glory comes later, not now.

In Christ's Church, the world's value system is turned upon its head. To be a disciple of our Lord means to walk in humility before God and man, to fight against sin, death and the devil. And so, we are constantly in need of reorienting our attention upon the things that are important to our heavenly Father, things such as humility, holiness, faith, self-control, and hope for greater things to come. James would describe it like

this, “But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace” (3:17–18).

To illustrate this, Jesus takes a child and places him in the midst of the disciples (vs. 36). An ordinary child becomes the means by which He teaches the priorities of God’s kingdom. In Jesus’ day, and to some extent our day as well, children represent the lowest rank in society. Children don’t command great sums of money, command armies, or control political power. Children are society’s most vulnerable citizens. They are certainly precious but earthly power does not reside in them.

Those who want to be first in the kingdom of God must become like that little child in Jesus’ arms: powerless, vulnerable, needy. Any attempt to claim power or status in Christ’s Church places you outside the Church.

After picking up the child, Jesus declares, “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me” (vs. 37). Our Lord reveals to us a great irony in these words. Receiving the least and the lowest in the name of Jesus actually means receiving the greatest gift of all. The child held in Jesus’ arms not only represents all who come into God’s kingdom, the child also represents Jesus Himself. God’s Son became the very last and the servant of all.

To become the least and the last in Christ’s Church is nothing less than to walk in the path that our Lord Himself followed. He became the lowest of all and servant of all, even to the point of being stricken and smitten in the place of others. After His bitter passion and death, God the Father resurrected Jesus in glorious splendor. And Jesus now sits exalted above the highest heavens as He sits on His Father’s right hand.

But suffering and defeat came first. In His death, Jesus served us by becoming the receptacle for all the filth, despair, and loss that the world’s sin produced. Exaltation and glory came second. Yet, even in His resurrection, Jesus lovingly serves us by rising again for our justification (Romans 4:25). He rises from the dead that He might go and prepare a place for us in His eternal kingdom (John 14:3). Ponder that wondrous mystery dear saints. Sitting in glory at the right hand of God the Father, Jesus is loving and serving us as He intercedes on our behalf to the Father.

How might today's teaching find practical application? A great place to start is with the family. Parents, the Lord gives you many opportunities to serve your children. You provide their food, shelter, clothing, education, recreation and so forth. But you must not forget your loving service in teaching them the doctrines and disciplines of God's Word. Teach them to pray. Help them memorize the Bible passages and the Catechism. Talk with them about the Gospel of Jesus. Show them how it transforms every area of life. In serving them, you follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

The opportunities are endless. Neighbor helping neighbor. The poor and distressed need your love and care. The Bible constantly admonishes us to show real tangible love to the widow, the orphan, the outcast, the stranger, and the forgotten. Maybe it's time we start teaching our kids and grandkids that a college education and comfortable salaries and lots of shiny, impressive gadgets aren't the most important things in the world. Instead, people are. In loving people through our various vocations, we are loving those whom God created in His own image, whom Jesus redeemed in His death and resurrection, whom the Holy Spirit desires to sanctify unto eternal life.

Will the world notice? Probably not. But who cares. Don't forget or overlook what Jesus promises. "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receive me, receives not me but him who sent me" (vs. 37) When we receive the lowest and the least in Jesus' name, when you serve others in Christ's name, we are in fact serving and receiving Jesus. And when we receive Jesus we are receiving the One who sent Him, God the Father Almighty.

Who is the greatest in God kingdom? Jesus. The same Jesus who gives Himself to us in every breath we take. Thanks be to God for this beautiful, indescribable gift!

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.