

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 19, 2021
“The Measure of Greatness” (Mark 9:30-37)

In last week’s gospel text, Jesus redefined for his disciples what the role of Messiah was all about. His ultimate mission as Savior was to save God’s people. So he disclosed to his disciples that his saving mission would include his suffering at the hands of the Jewish authorities, his being killed, and his rising again. That’s when Peter went ballistic and rebuked Jesus for such ridiculous talk. The idea of a suffering Savior just did not compute with their understanding of who Messiah should be. It wasn’t something they could wrap their minds around.

In today’s text, Jesus tries again to teach the disciples. As they journey together privately, he tells them once more. *The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and after three days he will rise again.* Jesus knows this is the *real* work of the Savior. He is going to save the world by suffering the world’s judgment, dying in the world’s place, and rising again to give life to all who will believe.

Now, for you and me, this might seem like old news. But to those first disciples, it doesn’t make any sense at all. They simply don’t understand. What is even more intriguing is that they don’t even try. Mark tells us that they are afraid to ask Jesus about it. Can you imagine? If you were visiting with a good friend and he told you the police were going to arrest him and that he would probably be found guilty and executed, wouldn’t you have a few questions? But when Jesus lays this news on the disciples, they don’t question him. And Jesus is more than a good friend. Through Peter, they have confessed him to be the Messiah. His death would mean the end of their dreams. Yet, not one of the Twelve dares to say, *Excuse me, Jesus, but we don’t understand. Can you explain it to us?* They all remain silent.

And maybe there is an explanation for this. Perhaps after witnessing Jesus rebuking Peter in the wake of his first announcement, they didn’t want to incite him again. Maybe they were, as some scholars seem to think, just too dense to grasp what was taking place. Or, perhaps they were simply in denial. The thought of Jesus’ death was too painful for them to consider, so they blocked it out, ignored it, pretended that it wasn’t going to happen.

That last possibility could be true of the Twelve, but why do so many of us not really want to ponder Jesus’ death? And the truth is, we don’t. Holy Week is the perfect example. Most churches have a good crowd on Palm Sunday, as we wave the palm fronds and remember Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Then on Easter, everyone is back (and then some), ready to sing *Jesus Christ Is Risen Today* and hear the story of the empty tomb. But on Good Friday, the attendance tends to be sparse. Given the choice, we’d much more prefer to think about his triumphal entry or resurrection than about his agony and death on the cross.

Perhaps we, like those first disciples, don’t want to contemplate Jesus’ death because the contrast between his way of life and ours is hard to reconcile. He talks about suffering, but we’re more into being exalted. He is more than willing to give – even his very life – but we prefer to take. He is completely faithful to us, but our willingness to follow him is conditional. That’s why we don’t want to ponder his death too deeply because it calls us to repentance and humility. It calls us to a way of life which the world tells us is unexciting and downright boring.

In any case, the disciples don't question Jesus about his suffering. However, as they make their way from Galilee, they argue. The topic of their debate is who among them will be the greatest. Not thinking about what Jesus has just told them – perhaps not *wanting* to think about it – they picture Jesus' ministry from their own perspectives. Remember, they have just identified him as the Messiah. So in their minds, he is now on his way to Jerusalem where, they are sure, he will become the new king who would rule Israel. They anticipate him setting the people free from oppression and ruling with justice and righteousness. And, of course, he will need help. No one is better qualified than they, his disciples, who have been with him from the beginning.

Mark doesn't record their conversation, but we can be sure that each of the Twelve feels that he should be second in command behind Jesus. And so they jockey for position, each asserting his own qualifications, trying to position themselves to get all the power and prestige they felt they were due as Jesus' closest friends and colleagues. Yet, later in Capernaum, when Jesus asks them what they were arguing about, they are silent once again. None of them says a word. They are too embarrassed.

But, really, what could they say? Jesus had just told them that he would be delivered up and die for their sakes, and they were arguing over how they would rule in his kingdom. He had pointed to his imminent self-giving and they were self-aggrandizing. He was getting ready to be humiliated before the whole world and they were puffing themselves up. No wonder they asked nothing when Jesus made the prediction of his impending death. The contrast between his life and theirs was too great. The cross called into question their ideas about greatness and service. It pointed to a way of life which put others before self, and that was too much for them to accept.

By his very nature, the almighty God of heaven and earth is a servant. He created Adam and Eve and all people that he might care for them. He created them in his own image to be servants to one another, to creation, and to their children. When they sinned, God did not respond with raw power and blot them out. Instead, he promised a Savior. God promised that he would serve them by doing all the work to deliver them from sin and death to grace and everlasting life. Therefore, it was God's service to all of us that Jesus was born. God continues to serve by providing all we need and by making sure that his Word is still proclaimed and the Sacraments are still administered, because that is where God offers the forgiveness that his Son, Jesus, has won.

Because God, by nature, is a servant, when he measures greatness, he measures it in terms of serving. In God's eyes, the one who is great is the one who serves. To drive home this point, Jesus gives them an object lesson using a little child. Unlike, today, children were not objects of attention or adoration. People didn't ooh and aah over them. They didn't talk about them being made of sugar and spice and everything nice. Instead, children were truly the least of these. They were held in the lowest of esteem. They were little and lowly and helpless. There was nothing about them that really mattered to those around them. And yet Jesus illustrates true greatness by taking one of these little nothings, placing him in the middle of the disciples and calling on them to welcome the child. Jesus makes it clear that true greatness is not based on how far they climb, but on how low they bow – even before those deemed unworthy. *Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.* Jesus turns our notion of greatness completely upside down, telling us that if we want to be first, we must be servant of all.

I wonder who Jesus might sit in the middle of us today? A child, neglected and abused? An elderly neighbor, lonely and forgotten? A homeless person who sleeps and eats at the local shelter? A depressed friend or addicted co-worker? A wife having an affair or a husband married to his job? Whoever it might be, Jesus would use that individual to call us to repentance and humility. He would remind us that true greatness comes not in climbing over the least of these, but by serving them. It would be Jesus' way of reminding us to contemplate the cross and to remember that in his death, we find not only our salvation, but the standard for living our lives. Amen.