

Sermon for September 27, 2015 -18th Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 9:30-37 NIV84

Theme: True Greatness . . .

- 1) *Is hidden from man.*
- 2) *Is revealed in our Savior.*

³⁰ *They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were,* ³¹ *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."* ³² *But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.* ³³ *They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?"* ³⁴ *But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.* ³⁵ *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."* ³⁶ *He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him 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."*

What do you think of when you hear the term greatness? Do you imagine a CEO like Steve Jobs and what he did for a company like Apple? Or do you think of a struggling, single mom – who can barely make ends meet - doing all she can so that her child might receive a Christian education? Do you imagine an athlete like Aaron Rogers and what he can do on the football field? Or do you picture a father taking time to help his son or daughter study the catechism?

“Greatness,” in the eyes of the world, is making a name for yourself – being powerful, popular and persuasive. We are told to admire people who achieve the goals they set for themselves and emulate their example in our own lives.

But this is not the path to true greatness in the eyes of God. Our self-accomplishments not only mean nothing to him, but, when mixed with pride, they are actually offensive. True greatness has nothing to do with making a name for ourselves, but has everything to do with glorifying God’s name. True greatness is not found in fulfilling our dreams, but in addressing the real needs of others – making them the beneficiaries of our work and God the object of all glory.

With Jesus as our guide, let us consider these things, under the theme: **True greatness. . .** 1) *Is hidden from man,* 2) *Is revealed in our Savior.*

Part One: True Greatness is hidden from man.

Our sermon text takes place after Jesus revealed his glory on the Mount of Transfiguration and his power by healing a demon possessed boy. Shortly after those events, Jesus and his disciples *left that place and passed through Galilee.* Where were they going? Ultimately Jerusalem, but on this particular day they only made it as far as Capernaum. They took a secluded route. Why? Our text says that *Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, because he was teaching his disciples.*

Jesus knew that the time of his sacrifice was fast approaching, and he needed his disciples to be prepared. He didn’t want them to lose heart or despair because of the events surrounding his crucifixion, but to look forward to his resurrection in faith.

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."

This is the second time Scripture records Jesus trying to explain the events of Holy Week in detail to his disciples. Jesus wanted them to listen to his instruction and – as hard as it was - accept it. His teaching of the cross was essential for them to understand what kind of Christ He is. Jesus was not some earthly king who would overthrow the Romans. No, he was the great “Son of Man” – the glorious prince of heaven that the Prophet Daniel foresaw in a vision receiving all authority over all creationⁱ. But Jesus would only receive this glory after He won salvation for us as God’s suffering servant, who (in the words of Isaiah) would be *pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.*ⁱⁱ

How did the disciples receive this instruction? We read: *But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.*

Oh these poor blind disciples! How could they let Jesus’ important words escape their hearts? To be fair, we have the privilege of looking back at the events of Holy Week – knowing what was all accomplished. I don’t think any of us can truly understand the shock and horror the disciples felt when Jesus spoke about his end. No one had ever raised himself from the dead before and crucifixion was an utterly shameful and terrible way to die. On top of this, Jesus was the Messiah. If He died, so would all their dreams of glory. The disciples probably thought, “No, there must be some other explanation or meaning. What Jesus said can’t be right, so it’s best not to think about it.”

And so the disciples were silent - afraid to ask Jesus about his teaching because he might tell them something they didn’t want to hear. They let their thoughts wander to other, worldly things centered in their own misguided imagination of Christ’s glorious reign and the positions of honor they would occupy in it. And this led them to discuss among themselves who would be greatest in the kingdom.

Brothers and sisters in Christ: note well how the disciples were so blinded by their worldly understanding of Christ kingdom and the glory it would entail, that they failed to listen to Jesus when He explained to them the true nature of his kingdom and wherein its true glory lay.

But let me ask you: is it any different with us? Like the disciples we all have our preconceived notions as to what God’s kingdom (Christ’s Church) ought to be like. Our flesh desires a comfortable, easy and glorious discipleship, and a Messiah whom we don’t have to be ashamed of before the world. But then we hear Jesus say something that goes against our preconceived notions of how things should be: something like God’s teaching on the roles of man and woman, God’s will concerning church fellowship, Christian suffering, or similar difficult doctrines. Those teachings make us uneasy. We don’t want to think about or study them because we are afraid of what we might learn. We don’t want our ideas about how things should be shattered, so we change the subject – thinking about worldly things that make us feel good.

Like the disciples, we sin when we do this. Thankfully the LORD is patient with us – just as he was with the disciples. And, when the opportunity is right, he confronts our thoughts with His Word, ready to teach us truth about his kingdom and wherein the glory of being his disciple lies.

Part Two: True Greatness is revealed in our Savior.

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

Sometimes it isn't until we are openly confronted with our thoughts that we realize how foolish they are. This was certainly the case with the disciples. Just think: Jesus, their Rabbi, was talking about his impending betrayal, death and resurrection and they were arguing who is greatest among them? Is it any wonder that they didn't want to tell Jesus what they were discussing? But, from what we know from the other Gospels, it seems as if Jesus kept pressing until one of them finally said: *"Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"*ⁱⁱⁱ

Now that the question was out in the open, Jesus could address it for all to hear. *Sitting down*, (this was a position Rabbis took in those days when they were about to teach a lesson) *Jesus called the Twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all."*

Oh, how different are Christ's words from the ideas of man. The world tells us that if you want to be great, you have to relentlessly pursue your own goals – realizing that you might have to step on a few toes to get ahead. But Jesus tells us something different: true greatness has nothing to do with selfish self-fulfillment.

No, greatness before God is all about loving others out of love for Him. It's found in putting the needs and welfare of others ahead of your own. God wants every Christian to pursue this kind of greatness, as St Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippians: ³ *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.* ⁴ *Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.* ⁵ *Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:* ⁶ *Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,* ⁷ *but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.* ⁸ *And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross!* ⁹ *Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,* ¹⁰ *that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,* ¹¹ *and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*^{iv}

Yes, Jesus humbling himself to earn our redemption is the embodiment of divine greatness - a greatness that saved and adopted underserving, sinful wretches like us into His heavenly kingdom. We have become God's children through faith, and as such, Jesus wants us to pursue the greatness He pursued – the greatness of welcoming even the least of his children and serving them in love, as Jesus' action illustrates: *He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him 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."*

Can you picture the tender scene? Jesus calling a little child to himself in front of all the disciples, and, when the child comes, Jesus picks it up and gives it a tender hug. The point is clear: Jesus loves children. He is not too busy for them – considering them unimportant.

Yes, the point is clear: Jesus loves children, and He wants us to love them too.

Greatness is not found in being surrounded by important people who are bent on serving you. Rather it is found in being surrounded by all the people in whom the world finds little value – like children and the simple – and welcoming them in Christ's name by witnessing Christ's love to them in both our words and actions. Doing such things is greater in God's eyes than being a famous CEO, politician or sports star.

And so, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, let us learn to pursue true greatness: seeing Christ in every soul we meet, and loving them as we would love our Savior. Do you want to be great in God's kingdom? Then look for ways to serve God's little lambs by teaching Sunday School or helping with VBS. Ask me who

the sick and shut in are and visit them. Find out if there is anybody in Confirmation whom you can tutor. Look for ways to encourage parents to send their children to our Christian schools in Algoma and Manitowoc. Choose to spend time with those whom others may consider strange or unpopular – encouraging them with your prayers and simple witness of the Gospel with your words and actions.

Denying ourselves to serve others out of love for Christ: this is what true greatness is all about. Sadly, this is also a greatness that all of us, by nature, have failed to pursue. For this we ought to repent – looking to Jesus for forgiveness and help. And Jesus freely grants us forgiveness and help. Through his suffering death and resurrection, He redeemed us from all sin. Through the preaching of the Gospel He welcomed us into his kingdom. We belong to him. Let us then, in the peace of Christ's forgiveness, ask Jesus to send us the Holy Spirit so that we might freely love and welcome others into fellowship with us, just as He has freely loved and welcomed us into fellowship with Him. Amen.

ⁱ Cf. Daniel 14

ⁱⁱ Isaiah 53:5 (NIV84)

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 18:1 (NIV84)

^{iv} Philippians 2:3-11 (NIV84)