

## Mark 9:30-37 – Jesus Is the Greatest

None of us would be so bold or brash as to argue openly who among us was best or greatest. We are not as crude as the disciples. Instead, we argue about sports teams or political parties or a thousand other things that mask our egos and cover our arrogance with a smokescreen. I know. I do it all the time. So do you. We have come a long way and we have learned not to be quite so obvious as the disciples. But that does not mean we are better.

In fact, we are the ultimate fools, bigger fools than the disciples who argued so openly on the road about who was greatest. Why? Because we think we have even fooled God by our suave and smooth moves. We are like children who protest they have not eaten the candy or the cookies while the evidence is right there on their lips. Gotcha!

Nothing is as shocking to us as greatness that is revealed in suffering and in mercy that is given to those who do not deserve it. It is no wonder why the disciples were arguing along the way about their own greatness. Nobody wants to talk about the kind of greatness that is delivered into the hands of man to be killed and after three days rise again. You don't want to talk about it and neither do I. But Jesus insists upon it. In fact, it often seems that is all He talks about.

Unlike our own day when old people act like children, in Jesus' day children were tolerated, not valued. The best children were those neither seen nor heard. Yet Jesus puts a child in their midst and says **“whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me ...”** It was a shocking way of turning the tables upon the disciples. They were, after all, the ones who were acting like children in their petty arguments over who was better and who was worse. Jesus takes a child in His arms and makes this the sign of the Kingdom. The first shall be last and the last shall be first and the one who is greatest must be the servant of all.

Jesus is not giving a recipe for greatness. Do this and you will get ahead of others. No, Jesus is still talking about His own death and resurrection. Greater love has no one than He lay down His life for those whom He loves. This is not a principle which we are to apply in our own lives but the radical shape of grace that must come down from on high because it cannot come from us.

This is not some new law designed to help improve us so we can be better people. This is directed squarely at the old Adam in us that continues to fight for a relative righteousness in which we are better and others are worse. This hits us squarely in the head because although we know that most people are hard to love, we presume that there is something in us which makes us worthy of being saved. And this points to the shock of grace that delivers the unworthy and the undeserving and proves its power not by savagely overcoming its enemies but by willingly being sacrificed for the sake of those who will be saved.

This is the repeated message of Scripture. The God who opposes the proud but gives grace to humble. The Song of Mary who delights in the God who has seen her lowliness but who has exalted her by His gracious favor anyway. Humble yourselves before the Lord and He will exalt you.

We hear this over and over again because it is our nature since the Fall to ignore this or to believe it may be true for others but it is not true for me. And in fact you will hear this same truth in various ways over the course of the next month or so of Gospel readings from the Gospel of Mark. The message gets old in our ears but it never wears out. We need to hear it over and over again because it goes to the heart of the Gospel.

The great temptation for us is to listen to the words of Jesus, nod our heads, and then go right back to using the ways of the world to define what is great and what is small, what is good and what is bad, what is powerful and what is weak. Even in the Church we still try to lord it over one another and turn the Gospel into a new law to be enforced. It was for this that a great Reformation took place in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and it is for this that God must continue to raise up voices to recall us to the way of the cross and not the path of power as the world knows it.

The kingdom of God is won by losing. Jesus loses His life. He does not do battle with our enemies but gives Himself up as the perfect sacrifice for our sins and for the sins of the whole world. He does not triumph by leading His enemies in a trail of blood and death, He sheds His own blood and enters into death for us. His resurrection does not erase or put into the background this suffering and death on the cross but shows that what He did accomplished what He promised. He rises so that He might draw all people to Himself.

Those whom He saves by His death and resurrection do not move to the head of the line to be in charge. They carry their own crosses and give up their own lives in suffering and in service just as He did for us. We are not redeemed to get

ahead of others but so that we might finally and fully be set free to love as He has loved us and to serve as He has served us, putting others before ourselves.

When the Chicago Cubs broke their 108-year-old losing streak, somebody jokingly commented that it was sad to see such a perfect record destroyed. We laugh but no one gets excited about a perfect record of defeats. How easy it is to put our redemption into the same terms. How easy it is for us to want to see victories, to reshape the world using the Gospel as a weapon of power, and to be a people who must be reckoned with. But that is not what Jesus asks.

Our Lord does not ask us to carry Him but promises to carry us. Our Lord does not ask for us to fight for Him but He insists He has fought for us. And when He sends us forth in His name, He does so as meek children who have nothing to say but what the Lord has said and no victory to boast of except the victory born of suffering, death, and the defeat of the cross.

He is not asking us to be childish. We are certainly experts at doing that on our own. Instead, He calls us to be childlike. As a child trusts his parents and receives their love without having earned it in any way, so do we trust Jesus and rejoice in His unearned and unmerited love. His power is perfected in weakness. We offer Him all our sins and all the reasons why we are nobodies, and He washes us in baptism and makes us His very own. Once we were no people but now we are His people. He directs us with the living voice of His Word. He feeds us the heavenly food of His flesh and blood. We were the least, the lost, and the last and by His death and resurrection we receive the first fruits of His redemption. We are still the least, the lost, and the last by the world's standards and yet Jesus sends us forth in His name to the world and tells us to trust in Him, to keep our eyes upon Him, and He will make all things come to pass as He desires.

I remember Ted Turner who in his media mogul heyday insisted that "Christianity was a religion for losers." Well, he was right though he did not see it. In Christ we lose our lives so that they may be born again by water and the Word. In Christ we who were no people have been made the people of God. In Christ we are sent forth into the world not with the tools or weapons of earthly power but with the cross. And if we trust in Him and bring the Word of the cross to the world, the last will be made first and the children will be redeemed and the humble will be exalted not merely for our fifteen minutes of fame but for all eternity.