

The 17th Sunday after Pentecost
September 19, 2021
Proper 20

The Lessons: Jeremiah 11:18-20
 Psalm 54
 James 3:13-4:10
 Mark 9:30-37

The Hymns: # 916 *Only-Begotten, Word of God Eternal*
 # 853 *How Clear is Our Vocation Lord*
 # 857 *Lord, Help Us Walk Your Servant Way*

The Collect: O God, whose strength is made perfect in weakness, grant us humility and childlike faith that we may please You in both will and deed; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Sermon:
 "The Greatness of the Lord"
 Mark 9:30-37

"And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you discussing on the way?" But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest."

Dear Friends in Christ,

Some people would think it's tacky, but it's more than that. Many would say that it's incredibly rude and insensitive, but it's far worse. In fact, it's sinful, but let's make sure that we understand the real sin at work here. It's almost incomprehensible, how dense the disciples can be. It's like they're on one channel and the Lord is on another, and it seems that the two will never connect.

That's what happens when each thinks and speaks of greatness.

I. The Greatness of the Lord

It's no secret that Jesus has come to be the Savior. The angels sang the news to the shepherds the night that He was born to virgin Mary. This is why the disciples have followed Him, even when others have turned back; and now that they've been with Him a while, Jesus has begun to teach them exactly **HOW** He's going to save. He's tried to tell them once before: Remember when Peter made the great confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. But then, when Jesus told him that the Christ had come to suffer and die at the hands of man, Peter went ballistic and denied the possibility. The idea of the Savior suffering just did not compute.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus tries again to teach His disciples. As they journey together privately, He tells them again, "The Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of men, and they will kill Him. And after He is killed, He will rise the third day." This is the work of the Savior in a nutshell: Jesus 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.

To you and me, this is dangerously close to old news; but to the disciples, it makes no sense at all. They don't understand what He's saying, and they're afraid to ask Him. Instead, the conversation shifts to what they do understand, and that occupies them until they arrive at their destination. What's the topic? We hear in our Gospel lesson: And when He was in the house He asked them, "What was it you disputed among yourselves on the road?" But they kept silent, for on the road they had disputed among themselves who would be the greatest (Mk. 9:33-34).

They had disputed among themselves who would be the greatest.

The words come to mind again: Tacky. Rude. Incredibly insensitive. Jesus has just told them that He is going to be betrayed and executed, and they respond by cutting Him out of the conversation and discussing which of **them** will be the greatest. The foolish banter is bad enough, but don't stop there: There is a far greater sin at work, and it is revealed by the discussion of greatness.

By nature, the almighty God of heaven and earth is...a servant. He created Adam and Eve so 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, He did not respond with raw power and destroy them. Instead, He promised a Savior; in other words, He promised that He would serve them by doing all the work to deliver them from sin and hell to grace and everlasting life. Therefore, it was in service to all that Jesus was born of Mary: God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son (Jn. 3:16). God continues to serve by providing all we need for this body and life. He also continues to serve by making sure that His Word is still proclaimed and His Sacraments are still administered, because that is where He gives the forgiveness that His Son Jesus has won. That's why we call worship "Divine Service;" not that we come and serve the Divine, but that the Divine, God Himself, comes and serves us.

God is, by nature, a servant. Therefore, when God measures greatness, He measures it in terms of serving. In other words, in God's eyes, the one who is great is the one who serves others.

Sinful man measures greatness in a completely opposite way. Greatness is achieved when you have so much power that you are being served by others. The more people you have under you, the greater you are. The less accountable to others you are, the greater greatness you have. When man thinks of greatness, he thinks of being worshiped, served and glorified by others. That's why our world idolizes movie stars, rock singers and professional athletes; the Old Adam looks at wealth, publicity and an entourage and says, "Now that's really great."

When the Lord and man talk about greatness, there's going to be conflicting views. Man looks at a king and says, "It must be great to rule over other people like that and always get your way." God looks at a king and says, "I've made you a king so that you can serve all these people I've entrusted to your care." Children look at their parents and say, "It's no fair to being a kid -- you just boss us around and make us do everything." Parents, meanwhile, look at children and say, "It must be great to be a kid, since we do practically everything for you." God looks at families and says, "Parents, I've given you children so that you can serve them by providing for their needs and teaching them My Word.

Children, I've given you parents to take care of you; and as you honor and obey your father and mother, you are learning how to serve."

The measure of greatness is completely opposite between God and man. Jesus says, "In service to the world, I'm going to suffer and die to redeem the world." This is the greatest service of all. By their discussion, the disciples have responded, "Suffering and dying isn't great. Rising up to be powerful is great. So which one of us will be the greatest of Jesus' disciples? Which one of us will have the most power and authority?" As noted before, this is tacky. But that's the least of it: By their discussion, the disciples betray how far away they are from thinking the things of God.

In response, Jesus teaches His disciples with a statement and an object lesson. He calls the Twelve and says to them, "If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all." This is a startling statement to the disciples: Greatness is found in service? Being best is found in being last?

What does that mean? In God's eyes, it makes perfect sense, because He is the Servant who created us to serve; but to man, it sound ludicrous.

So Jesus then takes a little child into His arms and says, "Whoever receives one of these little children in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me, receives not Me but Him who sent Me." This, too, must sound foreign to the Twelve: Childcare is something left to the womenfolk while the men go off and do manly-man stuff like catch fish and fight wars. Yet Jesus declares that service to children is great service. He has come to serve the world, children included, to take away their sins and give them eternal life.

The Disciples are to emulate that example and serve even the lowliest and smallest of society. However, Jesus is not just telling them to be kind to children: He is telling them something about their vocation as apostle. They will go out and receive even little children in Jesus' name—they will serve by bringing Jesus to all, even the smallest, by proclaiming His Word. And where one hears and receives the grace of God, God Himself is present. God Himself is serving there, pouring out the forgiveness of sins won by Jesus on the cross.

2. Great Salvation and Vocation

The Lord remains the Servant. He went to the cross and died for the sins of the world in service to all, and He still comes here to serve us by His means of grace. This is a very good thing, because we sinners still remain as confused about greatness and service as ever. People still desire positions of authority and the trappings of power they bring. Every once in a while, we witness someone who becomes famous for service, but the world treats that as an oddity: When Mother Teresa died after years of service in the slums of Calcutta, the response by so many seemed to be, "We need more people like her, as long as it's not me."

In passing, then, we note that this explains an awful lot about how people find the Gospel so difficult to believe. Remember, God comes to us as a servant, desiring to provide for us. However, sinful man attempts to make God in his own image; if man lusts for power and demands respect, then God must act the same way. This is why every manmade religion demands that we serve and appease God before He will save us. Do good works, destroy the enemy, throw the virgin into the volcano,

whatever -- but if God is like us, we have to do something remarkable so that we're great enough to be saved.

So man has trouble with the Gospel. God comes along and says, "Look, I'm a servant by nature and I've offered My Son on the cross for your salvation. He has done all the work to save you. By His sacrificial service, you have eternal life." Sinful man responds, "That can't be! We know that God is just like us, so there's no way He's going to humble Himself and go to the cross and totally win our salvation. We must have to work for it by serving Him." God responds, "Don't try to be saved by serving Me. Instead, trust that I've saved you by My service to you." Man responds, "That doesn't make sense at all. It's too good to be true."

So rejoice, my friends. God's plan for your salvation is good, and God's plan for your salvation is true. You are saved solely because the Lord has served you by His death on the cross, and continues to serve you by providing all you need for this body and life, and by providing forgiveness and life in His means of grace. He does this because, sinless and holy, He is by nature a servant. He wouldn't save you any other way.

The Lord is a servant who sets you free from sin to be a servant; and that sets you free for a life of servanthood and contentment. The Lord has placed you where you are to be a servant in that place.

Parents are given to serve their children, children their parents. Husbands are to serve wives, wives are to serve husbands. Employees serve companies and customers, employers serve employees. Church members serve on committees and boards. Whatever vocations you have, the Lord has placed you there to serve.

Therefore, if you have no position of authority recognized by the world, you may still be content: The Lord has placed you where you are to serve, and you do not need the world's approval to serve others. On the other hand, you may achieve some sort of position to which the world gives status; in that case, you are placed there by God to be a servant, whether your position is personnel manager, captain of the hockey team, or Prime Minister of Canada.

The Lord may give you skills, assets and wealth; should He do so, then rejoice that the Lord has entrusted these things to you so that you can serve others. On the other hand, if you have little in the way of material things, rejoice that the Lord has put you where you are, to serve with what you have.

This is the life of the Christian: Set free from sin by Jesus, the Servant who suffered the cross for us, we are set free to serve wherever the Lord has placed us.

We take special note today of a certain aspect of servanthood that the Lord points out in today's Gospel lesson: Service to children. The Lord's use of a child in His teaching is not just to say that the lowliest in society are to be served; He is emphasizing that His kingdom is for the least-for the children, and that we as Christians are to care for them. He does not refer here to clothing, food and shelter, though those are certainly important. Far more important, however, is that we receive little children in His name.

To receive a little child in Jesus' name is to put the name of Jesus on that child: This happens in Baptism, where the words are spoken, "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." It is at Baptism that the Lord places His name upon His child and makes him His own; in fact, the Lord's action in our text of taking the child in His arms reminds us of how He receives us by water and the Word. However, once a child is received in Jesus' name through Holy Baptism, we are called upon to keep that child in Jesus' name. We are to nurture that child with God's Word so that his faith might be fed, and he might eventually be prepared for the Lord's Supper.

So, to the Church, the Lord commands His servants especially to serve the least and receive little children in His name.

Parents, this begins with you at home. In giving you children, the Lord has called you into the vocation of motherhood or fatherhood; and there, at home each day, you have a multitude of opportunities to serve your children. Food, clothing, home, manners, good behavior—all of this is part of the service you render. However, as you care for your child's body and mind, do not neglect his soul. Read Bible stories. Memorize the parts of the Small Catechism. Pray. Talk about the Gospel and the Lord's grace and goodness each day, for it is only the Gospel that continues to sustain faith. Tell them again and again about how Jesus served them at the cross and continues to serve them with forgiveness now.

The greatest service you can render to your child is to teach them the Word of God. It is not an easy calling, for by the time the work- and school-day is done, there's little motivation left in parent or child to study a bit more. It is not an easy task; but given how much the devil and your sinful flesh hate the Word, would you really expect it to be? No. Teach your children of Jesus' love, and rejoice that the Lord continues to serve you and your children with heaping portions of grace, faith and life.

Receiving the little children is also played out here on Sunday morning at Sunday School. Sunday School is an oft-overlooked treasure, too frequently regarded as a place to park the children while the adults are doing something else. It is far more than that. It is an opportunity for children to be nurtured in the Word of the Lord; and where the Word is present, the Lord Himself is present. I wish to take this opportunity to thank Jenn Frim for organizing and teaching our Sunday School. In fact, Jenn was planning to begin teaching Sunday School today. However, we decided that it would be better to wait for a few more weeks to see if there would be any new Covid protocols for schools.

Nevertheless, Sunday School teachers are unsung servants of God who go the extra mile to teach the little ones. May we make sure that we make use of their services, for there is little more disheartening than to prepare a lesson for children who do not arrive that Sunday. May we also serve these teachers with our thanks for their sacrificial service toward the future leaders, musicians, workers and pastors of the Church.

We thus serve as we are able, and we do so with this joyful news: We are able to serve because the Lord has set us free to do so. He has allowed Himself to be given over into the hands of men, killed and raised again. He has done this as the Servant of all, so that we might be redeemed.

Therefore, my dear friends, rejoice as you go about the many vocations that God has given you; for as you go, you do so with the assurance that you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.