**September 19, 2021 Mark 9:30-37**

***The Greatest***

**Scripture:** Mark 9:30-37 NRSV

*(30)They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; (31)for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." (32)But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him. (33)Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" (34)But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. (35)He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." (36)Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, (37)"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."*

**Notes:**

1. Jesus is traveling ***away*** from the crowds.
   1. Jesus teaches that he was going to be ***betrayed***,
   2. The disciples are too ***busy*** to pay attention.
      1. “…*What were you arguing about on the way?*”
      2. “*(34)But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.*”
   3. The disciples are too absorbed in their own ***importance***.
   4. The greatest people in the kingdom of God are the ***weak*** and ***powerless***; the ones who ***serve*** others the most.
      1. “*Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.*”
      2. “*(37)"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.*”
      3. “*If you want to be a part of the kingdom of God, become as a child.*”
2. Who’s ***greatest*** in the kingdom?
   1. Who we are; that’s precious in God’s ***sight***.
   2. God loves us with an ***unconditional***, unending love
      1. *“(28)Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. (29)Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. (30)For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light*.” *Matthew 11:28-30 NRSV*
      2. “*The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.*” *Isaiah 11:6 NRSV*
   3. Most important is the power of God ***working*** within us and our ***willingness*** to let God use us.
      1. *“(25)For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. (26)Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. (27)But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; (28)God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, (29)so that no one might boast in the presence of God*.” *1 Corinthians 1:25-29 NRSV*
   4. Look to God and know that, with God, all things are ***possible***.
3. The greatest in the kingdom are those ***willing*** to lean upon our Almighty God.
   1. ***Focus*** upon the will of God in your life
   2. Only one is ***worthy*** to be recognized as the greatest.

**Script:**

I read an article about the feud between Joe Frazier and Muhammed Ali. How Cassius Clay stepped out of boxing for a period of time when he became a consciences Objector during the days of the Viet Nam War, and how Joe Frazier stepped up to take the title and retain it until Ali challenged him for it.

They went back and forth arguing over who was the greatest, well I should say that Ali made the claims that he was the greatest; and eventually they came to blows in the boxing ring three times before it was all settled and Frazier, more or less and in my opinion, left Ali have the bragging rights.

We all want to be seen as the best at what we do. What drive would we have to improve if we didn’t? But when that drive becomes obsessive to the point of ignoring who we are supposed to be in God’s eyes, in lieu of what we want to be seen as in our own eyes; then we need to reevaluate our priorities and passions.

Jesus’ disciples are no different. In our passage today, Jesus and his disciples have traveled to the north and east of the Sea of Galilee; and now are on their way back home.  As they walk along, Jesus tells the disciples what to expect in the coming days, and we find them distracted by their own drive to be “The Greatest.” Join me as we share in the reading of our passage today from Mark 9:30-37.

*Mark 9:30-37 NRSV (30)They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; (31)for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." (32)But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him. (33)Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" (34)But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. (35)He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." (36)Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, (37)"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." Mark 9:30-37 NRSV*

So the first thing I notice is that Jesus is traveling away from the crowds. Partly because the Jewish leaders wanted Jesus dead. Also, Jesus wanted some time alone with his disciples so that he could teach them about some things that are going to happen that they need to be prepared for. Jesus teaches about the fact that he was going to be betrayed, he was going to be killed, and after three days he would rise again. But they are to busy with their own thoughts and desires to pay close attention. I say this because when he mentions betrayal, death, and resurrection they do not respond to these things.

Why didn’t the disciples stop right their and then and demand a more clear explanation: “Whoa, Lord!  What are you talking about?  What do you mean, ‘The Son of Man is to be etrayed?’  Betrayed by whom?  Why?  What’s this all about?” You’d think Jesus’ declaration would’ve stopped them right there in the middle of the road, right there in their tracks, but nope, according to Mark, they just kept walking, as if he’d said something nonchalant like, “Tut tut, It looks like rain.”  He tells them that he will soon be arrested and crucified, and the next thing we’re told is, “*Then they came to Capernaum* ….” (Mark 9:33).

So, why didn’t His disciple’s pay attention to what he was saying, especially when he told them of his impending passion and death?  Mark says they didn’t understand what he was saying and that they were afraid to ask, but I tend to think there is more to it than that.  Just look at the next verse.  It’s right there in the text: They were too wrapped up in their own sense of importance; arguing over who is the greatest; just like Ali and Frazier. Mark writes Jesus words to them, “…*What were you arguing about on the way?*” to which Mark adds, “*(34)But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.*”

The disciples miss one of the most significant moments in history, because they were too absorbed in their own self-worth and importance.  The argued with each other and wanted to know which one of them would be greatest in the kingdom of God.  And this is what I hope you learn in this message today: The greatest people in the kingdom of God are not the rich and powerful, but the weak and powerless; not the ones with the most servants, but the ones who serve others the most.  To make this point to His disciples and to those of us who read this passage, Jesus gathers his disciples around him and explains, “*Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.*” Then he picks up a child who happened to be nearby, holding the child in his arms, and concludes his lesson with this, “*(37)"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.*”

If you read on to the next chapter in Mark’s gospel you will find people bringing their children to Jesus hoping that he might bless them.  The disciples try to stop this saying “Don’t bother him; he’s got more important things to do.” Because they thought it was a waste of time. But Jesus calls them out and stops the disciples stating, “…*whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple--truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward*.” *Matthew 10:42 NRSV*

On the surface, that sounds touching and sentimental, like a politician kissing babies.  What we need to understand is that, most often, when children are mentioned in the Bible, they’re usually lumped together with the women, cattle and traveling strangers.  In other words, when it comes to the kingdom, children are low on the food chain. But Jesus puts them at the top of the heap: “*To receive a child is to receive me,” he says “Allow the children to come to me.  Don’t forbid them.…  Whoever will not receive the Kingdom of God like a little child, he will in no way enter into it.*”

In Jesus’ day, children represented the epitome of powerlessness.  They had no rights or legal standing, and many times were not strong to defend themselves even if they wanted.  They were totally dependent on their parents to provide for them and protect them.  They were totally subject to the authority of others. Yet, Jesus said, “*If you want to be a part of the kingdom of God, become as a child.*”

What does this say about who’s greatest in the kingdom?  And what does that tell us about the value system of the world in which we live?

First, it tells us that it’s not what we have, but who we are, that’s precious in God’s sight. It’s no secret, the world values material wealth, and the more you have, the better.  “The one with the most toys wins!”  That’s the mindset of the world in which we live. Every year *Forbes*Magazine names the richest men and women of the world so we can ooh and aah over them – as if this were the most-important measure of success. But we can’t blame *Forbes*.  It is our fault because we are constantly looking over our shoulders and comparing what we have with others.  We call it, “Keeping up with the Joneses”; and just look at how we go nutso over “celebrities”.

Still we ignore what Jesus teaches us; about the nature of God’s kingdom; how, in the kingdom of God, the widow’s single mite is greater than the riches of the wealthy and how, in the final judgment, a lowly beggar like Lazarus will sit at the heavenly banquet while a wealthy miser watches from the flames of hell below. (Lk. 16)

The Bible speaks of a God who loves us with an unconditional, unending love … so that the one sheep who is lost is more precious than the ninety-nine who are safe in the fold; a repentant sinner is praised over a self-righteous Pharisee; and how not a single sparrow falls to the earth without grieving the heavenly Father.

This is a word we need to hear because, as far as the world is concerned, we’ll always come up short.  We’ll never have enough faith, or do enough good works; we’ll never have enough education or knowledge, or be righteous enough to stand in God’s sight. And yet, in the face of all these shortcomings and more, Jesus says, *“(28)Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. (29)Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. (30)For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light*.” *Matthew 11:28-30 NRSV*

In God’s sight what’s important is not what we have to offer – or what we lack – but who we are.  That’s what it means to become as a child in God’s sight It also means to rely on God’s strength, not our own.  In fact, it’s to live with the irony Paul discovered in his own life when the Lord said to him, “…*My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.*” and Paul responded to him, “*So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me*.” 2 Corinthians 12:9 NRSV

Paul’s not alone; remember how God called the young boy, Samuel, to bring the people of Israel back to faith?  Remember the story of David and Goliath?  David was only a kid!  And then there’s Solomon.  Just before he was to be anointed as king of Israel, he confessed, “… I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in.” 1 Kings 3:7. It was a child who gave his lunch to Jesus, to feed a multitude.  Jesus himself came to earth not as a gallant warrior, the son of nobility, but as a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, the son of a carpenter. It is little wonder, when Isaiah prophesied the coming of the kingdom, he said, “*The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.*” *Isaiah 11:6 NRSV*

It’s not our strength that’s important, but the power of God’s Spirit working within us.  It’s not our ability, but our availability, that counts – our willingness to let God use us as instruments of his grace and love.  This is what Paul said to the Corinthians, *“(25)For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. (26)Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. (27)But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; (28)God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, (29)so that no one might boast in the presence of God*.” *1 Corinthians 1:25-29 NRSV*

That’s what it means to become as a child, to rely on God’s strength, not your own. It also means to give up your stubborn, independent nature and trust God to direct your life and provide all that you need for a full and abundant life.  To be more specific, it means when you’re faced with obstacles you can’t overcome; when you encounter problems, you can’t solve; when you’re given a task, you can’t accomplish; when you’re faced with a challenge greater than your wisdom or ability. Look to God and know that, with God, all things are possible.

Here’s the bottom line: The greatest in the kingdom are not the rich and the powerful, the strong and the capable, the independent and the resourceful; the greatest in the kingdom are those who know their limitations and are those willing to lean upon the everlasting arms of our Almighty God.

Friends, if you want a place of honor in the kingdom of God, become as a child.  Rid your life of the unhealthy pursuit of possessions and power that this world offers. Begin to focus upon the will of God in your life and simplify the path you walk.

If you were asked to nominate just one person to be recognized as the greatest in the kingdom of heaven; who would it be? Yes we would all look at the names from the bible; but the rules say that it has to be somebody that you know personally, somebody that you have seen, and are able to identify God’s hand being in control of their life. Who would you nominate? Many of us would like to be nominated, I know I would. Although in many ways I fall short in the qualifications, and most likely you do as well.

But I can tell you with confidence that none of us are worthy to nominate or be nominated of such an honor. But if you were nominated, you would be humbled, right? You would do everything in your power to be found worthy of the nomination, and work diligently to receive such an honor. But You have not been nominated to be recognized as the greatest in the kingdom of God. There is only one who is worthy to recognized as the greatest and that is our Father God, His only son Jesus; the Holy Spirit.

Allow me to share this thought with you, for your consideration. Each of us have been nominated to spend eternity in heaven with Him. We were nominated when Christ died on that cross, the same cross that he was telling the disciples about in our passage today. We accept that nomination when we accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior. We accept that nomination everyday as we strive to live our life in His pattern; following His teaching and striving to live a sinless life. Are you living your life in an effort to receive tis nomination and prize, I pray that you are.

Today as we close, I would like us to sing the song Thou Art Worthy on page 66 of the hymnal. We do well to realize that we are not worthy but only the Lord is. We do well to strive to live up to the example of Christ, waking each day with the intention of living a sinless life, We may stumble and fall, but if we get back up and continue on we will eventually improve. We do well in keeping our hope in the redeeming blood of Jesus.