

THE PATH OF GREATNESS!

17th Sunday after Pentecost

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MARK 9:30–37

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise." But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him. 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. And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me."

Grace, peace and mercy from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

If you were here last week, you would have heard, about how all of us, at one time or another has had our lives thrown into the depths of despair and how God teaches us to deal with discouragement, by faith through the cross. And where does faith come from? ***"Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ!"*** (Romans 10:17). In today's text we shall see how the disciples dealt with the depths of despair under the theme, THE PATH OF GREATNESS!

Our reading of St. Mark's Gospel today, is actually a summation of something that began much earlier in chapter 9. To properly understand our text today we need to revisit those earlier events. For the most important thing in understanding Scripture is what? Context, context and context! Right off the bat in chapter 9 there was the transfiguration. Peter, James and John go up the mountain with Jesus and there on the Mount of Transfiguration, the radiance of Godly glory shines forth from Jesus. Peter, James, and John saw it. The disciples knew Jesus knew who Jesus was. Just 1 chapter before this, Peter said it: ***"Thou art the Christ!"*** (Mark 8:29). We need to add some historical/social context to this. When we say that Jesus is the Messiah - the Christ, what do we mean? Do you think of Jesus as the Christmas Christ, the babe in the manger, perhaps? Do you think of the Sacrificial Jesus as the Lamb of God, hanging lifeless on the cross, maybe? Or do you think of the Easter Jesus standing at the opening of an empty tomb, in the brightness of a new morn? I hope you think of all those things and much more. I hope that includes the Jesus who is still present and comes to you with the gifts of life, His Word and with His Sacraments.

But what did Jesus being the Christ mean to the disciples? You see, they were Zionist. The Zionist believed that the Messiah would come as a mighty king and restore Israel to a position of greatness. The nation of Israel would be in charge. They would rule over the rest of the world and the Promised Land would be restored. Now if you had that mind set, and many people including some Christian denominations do today, what would the Transfiguration look like to you? It might look like a heavenly war council. Jesus meeting with the greatest Jewish leader ever, Moses! And to the right of Him the most powerful prophet ever, Elijah! Imagine the thoughts that might have been swimming in the minds of the disciples. We're getting ready, the end of bondage is coming, and restoration is at hand. Oh boy, Jerusalem shall be elevated. The Great War is coming!

Peter loved being in presence of such splendor and power. So he offers to build some shelters that they might stay on the mountain top a while. While Peter is busy babbling about tabernacling on the mountain top the Heavenly Father speaks, ***"This is my beloved Son, listen to Him!"*** (Mark 9:7).

The reality is this: *"If you busy talking, you're not busy listening"*. And Jesus has some important words that He will be sharing with His disciples right after this event. ***"Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of Christ!"*** The disciples had been busy hearing themselves, the words in their head, the words etched into their minds through society and false teaching. They had misunderstood the Scriptures; for they had a theology of power and glory but not of the cross.

Right after these events, Jesus began to teach them about the way of the cross: The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And He will die, and after three days He will rise. It doesn't get much plainer and blunter than that, does it? No cryptic sayings, no puzzling parables. Simply and straight forward, put a death and on the third day, a resurrection. Talk about the depths of despair.

Mark tells us that the disciples didn't understand what Jesus had said, and they were afraid to ask Him about it. But who could blame them. What would you have thought at this point? You gave up your way of life to follow Jesus. You put all your hopes on Him. He looks like a winner, the real deal of a Messiah, a mighty warrior king, someone who will get the religious job done. He has the teaching and the miracles to back Him up. The crowds are on His side. His popularity is on the rise. The movement appears to be growing, gaining momentum. The deaf hear, the mute speak, the lame walk. Lepers are cleansed. Demons are cast out. The dead are raised. All the signs were pointing to Jesus as the one.

But then Jesus begins this crazy talk about being "handed over," being killed, and of rising from the dead on the third day. Crazy talk, irrational talk, not the kind of talk one would expect from a level headed Messiah who should be assembling an army and heading to fight holy war in Jerusalem. The disciples are afraid to ask, and they keep it to themselves.

Who could understand such things? Who would have orchestrated things this way? A crucifixion and resurrection that's not our way! We side with winners, not with losers. We seek successes, not failures. We go with number 1, not the runner up. That's how the world works. That's how we work. Winners like to hang with winners. It's why Christianity doesn't play well with worldly winners until they discover they're really losers. Who wants to wake up on Sunday morning to come to church to confess you're a poor, miserable sinner who needs forgiveness? The world would have you believe you're a winner entitled to your success, entitled to even more. Who wants join in the line with St. Paul to declare that we are the "chief of sinners"? It's no wonder the most popular religions of the world are based on winning and not losing. Even in Christianity we have our versions of being a winner and not a loser.

That the old Adam in us, the sinful self. The loser who won't admit it, who pretends to be a winner, who tries to go it on his own, being his own god, shaking his fist at God, doing it his own way, resisting the way of death and resurrection which is ultimately the only way to eternal life.

It must have been a long walk back to Galilee. Like one of those tense car trips where no one is talking but everyone has something to say. I imagine Jesus walking pretty much by Himself, with the others trailing. And what do you suppose they were discussing? They were arguing with each other about which one of them was the greatest? Who was the top dog? Was it Peter or John or maybe even James the underdog? It boggles my mind to think about it. Jesus had just revealed the greatest prophesy of His ministry, the incredible prediction that He would die and rise again, and instead of pondering this or asking Jesus about it, the disciples argue over which one of them would be the greatest.

Had the disciples been listening to Jesus? Or did they still believe that the kingdom would be restored on earth? Is it possible that they thought Jesus was going to go to heaven and rally the

armies of God to come back and claim the world? If so who would be the leader on earth? Who would be the greatest? Who would take His place?

And should we be surprised with how things are in the church today? Don't some in the church do the same thing today? They try to create a name for themselves while claiming to serve the Lord with organizations, clubs and books, all trying to promote themselves rather than the Living God. I appreciate the honesty of Mark, who delivers the whole eyewitness truth of Peter to us. Through the words of Mark, the disciples, including Peter, completely missed the point and were thinking of their own greatness. Again, the old Adam wants to be the winner, not the chief of sinners but just the chief. It's in all of us, the drive to power, to control, to be the lead dog, to be noticed, to get everyone else to do it our way. It goes beyond ambition. Ambition is simply setting goals and striving to attain them. This is something different. This is climbing to the top on the backs of your brothers. This is being so preoccupied with winning it all that you lose it all in the whirlpool of death.

James talks about this in his epistle this morning. James' hearers are apparently quite well off, successful business men, the movers and shaker of his day. He reminds them that friendship with the world puts you at odds with God. We can only stand before God in repentant humility, **"for God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble"** (James 4:6). And so the posture of faith before God is not one of pride nor of arrogance and boastfulness not one based in all that you've accomplished and why God should be so tickled that you consent to come into His presence. Rather, the stance of faith is humility, repentance and gratefulness for God's mercy. **"Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he shall exalt you"** (James 4:10). Humble yourselves; it's much better than being humbled by God. It is far better to humble yourself, with the expectation that God will lift you up. He will exalt you in due time, in His own way, by your dying and rising.

Jesus gathers the Twelve together and says, "If you want to be great in my kingdom, you have to be a loser. If you want to come in first, you have to come in last and be the servant of all, because that's where I am. I, the Lord of all, have become the Servant of all, and am about to become the biggest loser in the eyes of the religious world by getting myself crucified at the hands of Religious and Political rulers. But don't worry about it. Losing is winning in my kingdom, and I will rise on the third day more victorious from death than any of you guys could ever imagine. You want to be great in life? Then drop dead with me."

Jesus, the great teacher, brings in an object lesson, a little child. Context again: In Jesus' day children were not the little winners as they are today. They didn't glamorize and idolize childhood back then. Children were loved but they were losers, a drain on the family assets. They couldn't be raised quickly enough and married off if you were a girl or put to work if you were a boy. There was no luxury of prolonged childhood or adolescence. It wasn't a time to find yourself or to chase your dreams. It was an expressway to adulthood as quickly as possible.

That's what Jesus used as a pattern for kingdom faith – a little child, a child small enough to be picked up and held in Jesus' arms. He says, "Boys, if you want to understand the path of greatness, then you must become like one of these little ones. I must carry you, and you must always trust me to carry you. **"Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but Him who sent me"** (Mark 9:37).

Remember the saying, "Don't send a boy to do a man's work." Jesus says, "That's precisely what I'm doing. I'm sending little children in my name, and to receive them is to receive Me and the Father who sent Me."

Now we're talking childlike not childish. We have plenty of childish Christians around who need to come to the full measure of their maturity in Christ or life in general. Jesus is talking childlike –

trusting as a child trusts his father or mother. Receiving as a child receives all things without any merit or worthiness on their own, being graced by God's undeserved kindness in His own beloved Son, Jesus Christ our Savior.

You understand this passage only as you understand Jesus as the Child of God the Father. He is that Child held in the arms of His Father, and you are baptized into Him and are that child too. He is the One who came not to be first but last, the Lord of all who came not to be served by the world but to serve the world by laying down His life to save it. And you, are baptized into Him and believing in Him have become last with Him, joining the ranks of those who have lost their lives in order to gain them, living this life not as your own to be served by others, but to serve others as Christ Jesus has served you. The focus isn't here (curvatis en se) but there (†) and there and there and there (pointing at others) outside of you.

Of course, it can only be understood by the cross of Jesus. And I don't mean a symbolically empty cross, but a cross with dead Jesus on it. There (†) is the greatness in the kingdom of God, my friends. There (†) is the power perfected in weakness. There (†) is the glory such as the world has never seen. There (†) is the victory right in the midst of death. That is you for you, baptized and believing child of God. That is also your life as it appears to the world. Dead, crucified and lost. You're a loser in this world if you believe this stuff. Ted Turner even confirms when he once said: "Christianity is a religion for losers." At least he gets it, conceptually speaking.

But to lose your life in Jesus, the grand Loser, is to win your life forever. Trust it in the way of a little child does, and you will see it. For in the cross you shall see the greater glory, for by it the price for your sins has been paid in full. For you are forgiven all you sins in the name of the Father and the Son and Holy Spirit, in Jesus name, amen and amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,
AMEN!