

MARK 9.30-37
AN EXPOSITION FOR THE
EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER
PENTECOST 2003

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Rev. Dr. Jonathan C. Naumann
Redeemer Lutheran Church
Oakmont, Pennsylvania

Grace be to you and peace from the One who was and is and is to come. Amen.

- ³⁰ *They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know,*
- ³¹ *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."*
- ³² *But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him.*
- ³³ *And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you discussing on the way?"*
- ³⁴ *But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.*
- ³⁵ *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."*
- ³⁶ *And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them,*
- ³⁷ *"Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him*

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; to the disciples, it doesn't make 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 it 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.

What a strange thing to be arguing about, given what they had been learning from Christ! 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 tawdry boorishness is bad enough, but do not stop there:

There is a far greater sin at work, and it is

a fundamental misunderstanding concerning God's definition 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 blot them out. 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 to 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 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 others are serving you. The more people you have under you, the greater you are. The less accountable to others you are, the greater greatness you have. When you and I think of greatness, we think of being worshiped, served and glorified by others. That's why our world idolizes pop stars, movie stars, and professional athletes; the Old Adam in us looks at wealth, publicity and an entourage and says, "Now that's real greatness."

When the Lord and man talk about greatness, there are 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 be the 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 your father and mother, you are learning how to serve."

Do you see what I mean? Have we got things precisely backwards or what?

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 follow reasoning that is quite alien to God's reasoning. By such reasoning, 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; to our natural way of thinking, and that of every other religion, it may sound ludicrous.

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. (In our own day, it has only gotten worse, as society says that childcare is best left to someone outside the family so that womenfolk can pursue greatness in the workplace.)

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 Twelve 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 apostles.

They will go out and receive even little children in Jesus' name. They will serve by bringing Jesus to all, even the smallest, by His Word and Sacraments. And where one is presently receiving the grace of God by these means, God Himself is present. God Himself is serving there, pouring out the forgiveness of sins won by Jesus on the cross.

In all of this, paradoxically, 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 anomaly: 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.” 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.” Rejoice, dear Christian. 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. He calls you to a vocation that brings not only servanthood but contentment. I say this because, if you truly recognize your work in life is a vocation from God, then you will be content to know that 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 can 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 basketball team, or President of the United States.

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 Ghost." 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 the 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. Bring your children to Sunday School regularly, but know that it is not enough. You wouldn't say, "Since the school hot lunch program feeds my child, I don't have to provide food at home." You wouldn't say, "Since my child gets one Bible story a week at church, that's enough," would you?

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 the Lord's 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 and encourage our Sunday School teachers. These are unsung servants of the Good Shepherd who go the extra mile to teach the little ones here; they are truly at the forefront of our efforts to receive little children in Jesus' name. 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.

At Redeemer Lutheran Church and School, we have one more privilege and opportunity to receive little ones in Jesus' name: We have a day school. In economically challenging times, it is easy to dwell on the cost and expense of running a parochial school, and this is indeed a matter of concern. But as we discuss the financial challenges that lie before us, let us never forget the reason for that school: It is not just a school, but a mission field. Children of the congregation are nurtured daily with Bible stories, prayer and Gospel. Children from outside the congregation hear of the Savior here, and may not hear of Him anywhere else. This endeavor is one that currently calls for more sacrificial service than before; but what an opportunity to serve!

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, 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