

“The Greatest”

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Readings:

Mark 9:30-37

Chapter 9 of Mark’s gospel is full of high and low moments.

It begins with Jesus being transfigured – Moses and Elijah are there – it is a great moment.

Jesus and his disciples walk down the mountain – and Jesus turns his face towards Jerusalem.

Jerusalem- the Messiah is heading towards Jerusalem- where he will claim his throne – where he will triumph- and his kingdom will begin- or at least those are the ideas that are floating through the disciples’ minds.

Jesus, I’m sure aware of this, spent that time on the journey trying to teach the disciples the essential lessons of what it means to be a disciple and what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah.

He told his disciples quite openly that he was going to be betrayed into “human hands” – into the hands of all humanity – you and I – and he was going to be killed...

The disciples didn't understand what all of that meant – and they were afraid to ask.

As they entered Capernaum Jesus entered a house and continued the lessons.

He was trying to get the disciples to understand that his kingdom is about servanthood, about loving the least, about suffering for the sake of others, and about giving one's life – Jesus giving his life for the sake of the world.

The disciples were having their own discussion on the way.

Which one of them was the greatest?

Order in the kingdom of God was mirrored with the order on earth – the Priests were first, then the Levites, then the righteous.

What order would the disciples be in when Jesus came into his kingdom, which of them would be first, second and so on...

What a jolly conversation for surely they would all be at the head of the line.

They were on their way to Jerusalem...

Jesus interrupted their conversation – what were you talking about on the way???

It seems that confronted by Jesus they catch that maybe their conversation wasn't entirely appropriate.

Jesus, ever the teacher sees that the disciples are still thinking in the world's terms for what his kingdom would look like.

They are imagining that it will look not too unlike the Roman Empire, or maybe the religious empire of the priests- only they (the disciples) will be at the top of the heap.

Jesus tries again to make it clear that the kingdom of God looks just about the opposite to the kingdom of the world.

Instead of just words, Jesus brought a child into their midst.

Children don't win battles, children can't be used for your success, at least not in Jesus' day.

Caring for children was not going to advance the kingdom of God in any way the disciples understood.

Jesus embraced a child – brought the child into the inner circle and told the disciples that the greatest will be the servant of all.

The word “servant” is the word that is used for the guy waiting on tables.

And going on, Jesus said that if they welcomed the least/last – like the child in their midst - then they welcomed Jesus, and in welcoming Jesus, God the Father is welcomed.

So who is greatest?

In this the church looks the opposite to the world – the greatest is the servant.

The one who cares for the least and the last is honoured by God.

Ever consider what makes a church great in the eyes of Jesus?

Jesus’ teaching invites us to see the world and how the kingdom of God works, and where we fit in this kingdom not in the usual terms – but upside down. Jesus overturns the prevailing assumptions about power and security by inviting the disciples and ultimately his church, to imagine that abundant life comes not through gathering power but through displaying vulnerability, not through accomplishments but through service, and not by collecting powerful friends but by welcoming children.

We are invited to find our security, our importance and our place in God's kingdom by serving the needs of others – and not worrying so much about ourselves and our preferences.

The church does not exist to fulfill the needs of its members – we are a community of disciples of Jesus – we are learning to be better disciples – and we are reaching out to disciple others.

The Saviour we serve, the example we follow, is Jesus.

Jesus embraced children – we embrace children. Jesus embraced the people everyone else turned away – our aim as a church is to embrace and serve any, especially those who are invisible to the world.

Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem – on the path of suffering.

The church that follows him walks the same road – it is a road of sacrifice – it is a path servanthood.

Every other way is easier for the church.

We want to be victorious – we want to be wealthy as a congregation, we want to be respected- to have a voice in the community – to have power- to have a secure future - but that's not the community Jesus called into being – he called disciples – who are willing to learn his way-

who will keep their eyes fixed on him- as he heads toward Jerusalem not to the crown but to the cross.

It's so hard for us to keep our eyes on the goal of knowing Christ and making him known – on being disciples and making disciples.

But it is the way that leads from death to resurrection –

A number of years ago a journalist spoke at Knox College Convocation.

He was an international correspondent who had covered all the major catastrophes – famines, natural disasters, refugee crisis.

In those places of pain, over a lot of years he eventually came to faith because of what he saw from Christians – from the church, the body of Christ.

The Christian Church, Christian agencies were always there first.

Christians were in every place of need before the cameras, before the reporters, before the story was told to the world.

And they were always there long after everyone else left.

When the sound bites were finished, the spot light faded, and everyone else was off to the next story, the church, Christian people were still there – caring, responding, doing the work of the gospel.

For a long time he wondered about those Christians, even laughed at them – but eventually he became one, and he began following the one they followed.

It is the way our Lord went- and it is the way His church follows – joyfully finding in our serving that this is the path to freedom – gladly giving and sacrificing for the sake of our Lord who went to the cross for us.

Finding in our giving that we are the ones blessed – that as we lose our lives for Jesus' sake, we find them.

And in this we need to continue to remind ourselves what we are doing and why we are doing it.

In serving others we are blessed, and very often we feel good and we feel joy, and that's part of the life we experience following Jesus.

But we don't serve to do anything for ourselves.

Because sometimes we don't feel good, sometimes it's just hard.

Sometimes we are not thanked or appreciated, and sometimes we meet miserable, frustrating people.

But still we serve.

Because the one we follow is Jesus, it is for his sake we go, it is for his sake we learn, and he is the one who brings us joy as his gift to us.

He is the King and head of His church, His mission is what gathers us, learning to follow Him is what we are about together.

Thanks be to God!

Prayer:

Eternal God, you love us and you call us as your church not to glorious victory in the eyes of the world, but glorious service. You call us not to power and prestige, but to care and laying down our rights, our preferences, and humble ourselves to servanthood. Keep our eyes on You and Your ways we pray. Amen.