

Sermon Notes – September 20, 2020

“Ambition, Success, and Greatness in the Kingdom of God”

Mark 9:30-37

Most of us have had times in our lives when our spouse or a child or a brother or sister have come to talk to us about something and we didn't want to hear it, did we? Have you ever been in a situation in which your spouse wanted to talk to you and you tuned them out because you didn't want to hear it? Or maybe someone is talking to you and you're watching TV and you're preoccupied with something else and you're not hearing a thing they said? They go back and ask you about it later and you don't remember what they've talked about or you just don't want to talk about it. That's what happened with these disciples. Jesus had told them several times that he was going to be betrayed and arrested - he was going to be killed and crucified - and he was going to rise in three days - but they didn't quite get it. They were preoccupied, in our scripture today, with *who was the greatest?* You see, they kept thinking that Jesus was going to start his earthly kingdom - he was going to come in as a Messiah King and overthrow the Romans and the Israelites would make the Romans their servants. These disciples thought they could be officers in Jesus' earthly kingdom - Secretary of State, Vice President, Secretary of Defense, etc. They wanted a power position over people. Jesus thinks, “You guys just don't get it.” He sat them down, like a Rabbi teaching his disciples, and he started teaching them about *who was the greatest?* He said, “If you want to great, you will have to be last of all and a servant to all.” Then he picked up a little child and he held him in his arms and said, “Whoever welcomes this child, welcomes me. Whoever receives and values this child, welcomes me and values me and the one who sent me.”

Jesus wasn't putting the disciples down for having ambition. Don't most of us have ambition and drive - we want to be the best we can in our family, our career, at school? We want to do the very best. It's okay to have ambition. Jesus was wanting them to direct their ambition in the right way - instead of about self-advancement and self-promotion. He wanted them to direct it toward serving others - that it's not about

comparing yourself to everybody else - it's not about conquering everybody else and having power and position over everybody that makes you great in the kingdom of God. ***Greatness in the kingdom of God is about service to others and especially those who are the devalued, the rejects, the outcasts, the poor, the needy, and the helpless.*** Jesus used the example of a little child. Children, in that day and time, were "a nobody" - they had no status, no position, and no value. In fact, they were lower than women on the totem pole. Men were at the top. Women, slaves, cattle, and children were all considered possessions and things. If a family had too many children and didn't want them, they would put them on the garbage dump to die or to be sold as slaves - especially if they had too many girls because men were prized in that day. Children were at the bottom, "a nobody." Jesus changed what these disciples thought - by picking up and holding the child, he showed them that He valued the child - *that every person has value in God's eyes - and that we are to value all people no matter who they are. No matter their race, nationality, young or old, rich or poor, or whoever they are, we are to value them and minister and serve them.* So, Jesus doesn't put down their ambition about wanting to be great - but he wants them to be great in the kingdom of God - and that means serving others.

Some of you remember the name Dave Thomas. Dave Thomas was the late founder and former CEO of Wendy's fast food chain restaurants. What you might not know about Dave Thomas was that he was adopted as a child. He never graduated from high school. He never got a college degree but he went on to be a successful business man. He always said, "I got my MBA before I got my GED. I'm probably the only founder and CEO of a large company that has my picture on a corporate magazine wearing an apron down to my knees, holding a mop, and looking at a plastic bucket. My commitment is to service and I taught my employees, even from the top down, to be willing to mop the floor, empty the trashcans, wash the dishes, etc. It's always important to get in there and get beside your employees and serve. You are not above them." Dave Thomas had a commitment to serve.

Mother Teresa was once asked about service and why she did what she did. She answered the news reporter and said this, “One day at the end of our life, we will not be judged by how much wealth we own, how many possessions we have, or how many diplomas we have received. We will be judged by something that Jesus said, ‘I was hungry and you fed me. I was sick and you visited me. I was in prison and you came to me. I was naked and you clothed me. I was thirsty and you gave me drink. In as much as you’ve done it to the least of these, you have done it unto me.’” – in other words, followers of Christ are to serve others.

Jesus was concerned that we value all people and that we serve people - instead of getting caught up in our self-promotion, self-advancement, and serving others because it makes us look good or it promotes us in some way. Jesus taught us to serve out of love, not obligation. Do you know what the word “servant” means? The Greek word “diakonos” means “a person who attends to the needs of others freely and willingly, out of love and not obligation. Well, let’s be honest, how many of us would rather be served than to serve? Isn’t that most of us? We would rather be served than to serve. We would rather be number one and at the top. Sometimes we want that recognition and acknowledgement. Jesus was trying to tell the disciples not to get so caught up in having power and position over others that you forget about serving people and their needs and their concerns.

Martin Luther King once said, “Everybody may not be famous; but everybody can be great because everybody can serve. Greatness is measured by service. They can serve because they have a heart of grace and they have a soul possessed by the love of God.” Everybody won’t be famous, but they’ll be great. Jesus talks about if you want to be number one in the kingdom of God, you are a person who serves others.

There’s a lady who lived years ago named Marion Hill. She was from Europe. She was a princess who grew up in a royal palace in Hungary. When she graduated from high school, she wanted to go to Vienna, Austria to become an actress. While she was there, she met a man who was studying to be a medical doctor and she fell in love with him. His

name was Otto Primer. He finished medical school and they moved to Hollywood, California. They got married and started having children. He set up his medical practice and she became a wife, mother, and hostess to all his parties. Well, it ended up that he became more interested in directing and producing movies than he did medicine. He gave up his medical career and went into movie producing. He became known as a famed International Movie Director - Otto Primmenger. His wife got tired of the lifestyle and she turned to alcohol and drugs and affairs. Eventually, the couple divorced. She decided that she wanted to go back to Vienna, Austria. While she was there, she met a man named Dr. Albert Schweitzer. Dr. Schweitzer was a medical doctor, a concert pianist/organist, and went on to be a medical missionary - a doctor over in the jungles of Africa. He was home on furlough in Vienna, Austria and he met this woman. He and his wife invited her to their home. They got her into AA and she started rehabilitating from the alcohol and drugs. She became a believer in Jesus. As time went on, they not only counseled her, but befriended her. When he got ready to go back to Africa as a missionary doctor, he asked her if she would like to go with them - and she did. What she ended up telling reporters was, "Dr. Albert Schweitzer taught me that there are two kinds of people in the world - helpers and non-helpers. I'm glad that he gave me the opportunity to be a helper and a server because it's in helping and serving others that I found my purpose and meaning and happiness. I'm so glad he taught me that." Dr. Schweitzer also said, "The greatest person in the world will be some unknown person doing the work of love in the world." Who do you know that serves Christ and they do it humbly? They don't do it for any accolades or attention, but they are always behind-the-scenes doing something and serving.

What I think that this passage of scripture tells us is that God calls us to serve him with our time, talents, and monies. But he also tells us to especially minister to those who can't pay us back, who can't return that love. They may be poor and needy and helpless - they may be widowed or orphaned or whatever - they may be another race or nationality - but they are somebody who can't pay us back. I don't know about you, but many times our attitude about serving and helping the

poor and needy comes from how we were brought up. If our parents and grandparents were helping others, we'd probably learn some of that and we'd do it in some of the same ways they did - unless we change as years go on. I think a part of what Jesus is wanting us to do is grow in our attitude of serving - who we serve and how we serve - *that our attitude and our actions are important*. You know sometimes we want to help people and we want to do it because we feel like we have to or somebody is going to look down upon us if we don't - or we say, "They're going to use that to get drunk or use this to do so-and-so" - Guess what? We're not their judge - God is. I can't control what they do - you can't control what they do. ***But I know that one day we will give our account to God or what he's called us to do. God has called us to help people and to serve and to help all people feel valued - no matter who they are or where they come from.***

You want to be great in the kingdom of God? Jesus said you will learn to serve - not to always want to be served, but to serve others. How do we do it through our actions and our attitude! Jesus is concerned about our attitude about people and how we look at them. In first Samuel, Samuel went to appoint a new king and he looked at the home of Jesse - at all his sons. When he'd gone through all of them, except David, God said to Samuel, "Man looks at the outward appearance, but God looks at the heart." When they went and got David out of the sheep pasture and brought him in, God told Samuel, "That's the one. He's got a heart after God." God looks at our heart - but he looks at our actions too. ***What does God want us to do today? ...To grow in our attitude of serving - out of love and not out of obligation. Serve because it comes second-hand to us. It's something that we want to do and it honors God.***

I hope that we grow in our attitude and I hope we grow in our actions. I compliment you on all you do in this church because you serve in so many different ways. I don't know about you, but sometimes I have to grow in my attitude because it's not always pleasing to God. Sometimes with my actions, I probably walk past somebody.

There was a study done of some Princeton Theological Seminary students who were supposed to write a paper and then go and have it taped at the recording studio on campus. The professor met them that morning and he gave them assignments. "I want you to go to the recording studio and tape your understanding of the parable of the Good Samaritan. I want you to talk about your ministry and what it means to you." While the twenty students were on their way to the studio, the professor took a person, who was a theater actor on campus, and had them dress up as a homeless person and position themselves so that all students would come across him. He had a disheveled look, wore tattered clothing; his hair was dirty, he had grown out his beard and was scraggly looking. He portrayed being sick and having a heart attack. He said, "I think this is it. I think I'm dying. Would you guys help me please?" Guess how many students stopped? ...80% walked right by him - 20% either walked around him, asked him how he was doing, offered to give him \$1 - and only two or three students stopped to help him rather than going on to the studio. Doesn't that sound like us sometimes? We don't want to be bothered. We're too busy.

I think that Christ wants service to be second-nature to us and that we help people because we want to and we're willing to because of Christ's love for us and what he's done for us. Jesus taught us service by washing the feet of his disciples. He humbled himself and died on a cross for us. He taught us about servanthood and he wants us to be servants in the world. Who is the person in your family, in your school, in your business that needs to know that they're valued and they're welcomed? Would you welcome that person this week and value them? Would you do something for them - knowing that they may not can give you anything back? Who is the person on the street that we can help? ***May God open our eyes to grow in service to one another in our attitude and our actions.***

Would you pray with me? Holy and Gracious Father, help us to understand that we are much like your disciples. We're ambitious - we want to succeed in business, in our family life, in our careers and school - and that's ok, Lord and you don't condemn for that. But Father, you do

want us to serve others and serve you and give honor to you. Help us to grow in our attitude and in our actions this week, this year. Father, would you mold us and shape us into the likeness of Christ. It's in your name, I pray. Amen.

I have one story left for you - and that is a fable that came out on the internet. It was about a knight in a kingdom and he wanted to be the best knight he could be. So, he made a vow to the king, "I will never bow down to anybody or pay homage to anybody but you." All those years, he had on all the shields, helmets, and armor and he stood guard at the city entrance to the royal palace. Every day, he stood there at attention just in case the king came by and he'd be ready to bow and give him homage. One day a lady came by and she was rolling a wheelbarrow of potatoes and onions and vegetables from the garden. All of a sudden, she hit a rock and the wheelbarrow turned over. She asked that knight, "Would you help me?" He said, "Nope" and he stood there at attention and let her pick up all the stuff herself. A few days later there was a man on crutches (he had lost a leg) who tripped and fell close to the knight. He asked the knight, "Would you help me get my crutch and get back up?" The knight stood at attention and never offered to help him. Finally, his little grandson came by and says, "Grand-daddy, Grand-daddy, please pick me up and take me to the fair today!" He wouldn't do it. And then one day, the king came by and the knight was standing there. His armor had rusted around his elbow joints and knee joints. He started to cry. The king said, "Why are you crying? You're the most noble knight, I know!" And he said, "Sir, I made a vow to you that I would never bow to anybody, but you - and now my joints are so rusted that I can't even bow and I can't even raise my arms." The king looked at him and said, "Maybe, if you would have embraced those who came to you, maybe if you had bowed to help them, you could now give me honor."

May we give honor to Christ in our attitude and actions - as we serve others. Amen.