

Rev. Kurt Cockran, Risen Savior Lutheran Church (Basehor, KS), 17th Sunday after Pentecost, September 19th, 2021

Jesus Became Last to Make Us First

Mark 9:30-37

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ,

Jesus is on a mission, and the disciples just don't get it, not yet at least. Time and time again in the Gospels we hear enigmatic sayings of Jesus that make us scratch our heads. The people ask Jesus to speak plainly, and before we know it he is saying something else mind-boggling. This time, however, Jesus speaks quite plainly, **“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.’ But they did not understand this saying, and were afraid to ask Him.”** Not only do they not understand, but they are even too afraid to ask! This is the second of three times that Jesus speaks this prediction, and it isn't until all is said and done and these predictions are fulfilled that they finally *get it*. Are they simply ignorant? No, but they have an incorrect understanding of the Messiah.

Think of yourself as one of these disciples. You changed your life in order to follow Jesus. He has shown the signs of the Messiah which Isaiah foretold: heals the sick, casts out demons, cleanses lepers, even raises the dead, and all while teaching as one with authority from above. But the Messiah as that *Suffering Servant* from Isaiah? Now come on. Get real. Our Savior has to be one of power and might who will raise up an army to overthrow the evil powers of the world, like those Romans taxing our arms and

legs. And if we're the first ones to follow Jesus, maybe, just maybe, he'll grant us our own glory in the new government He establishes on earth.

Just before our Gospel text, Peter, James, and John went up the mount of transfiguration, where they saw Jesus transfigured, his clothes became shining, exceedingly white, like snow, and Moses and Elijah appeared and spoke with him! Jesus instructed Peter, James, and John to keep it quiet, but we all know how well people keep secrets. This is quite likely the context for this argument about who was the greatest. Could it be that Jesus is picking his cabinet for when he comes into his glory? Is Peter his vice-president? James his secretary of state? John his secretary of defense? Maybe we other disciples could ask if we can sit at his right hand and his left when he comes into his new government, his new kingdom, so that we too could become great and honored by all!

But what is this dying business? Jesus has shown himself to have power over the demons and to raise others from the dead. How could *he* be handed over and killed? This is crazy and I (again imagining ourselves as an apostle) I don't like it one bit. Hopefully he doesn't know what he's talking about. Peter even tried rebuking Jesus, but Jesus instead shouted for Satan to get behind him, as if Peter had a demon! But how *can* we understand? Crucifixion? That's for the criminals and the scum of the earth, not for the great and innocent ones like Jesus. No, we did not give change our lives to follow Jesus just to see who we thought was the Messiah hanging on a tree.

Now...end imagining...and consider <pause> how often we think like this today. We like to associate ourselves with those who succeed, not those who fail. We were Yankees or Cardinals fans until the Royals finally came around in 2014, or only so hot on the chiefs until Patrick Mahomes (muh·howmz) arrived. We send our kids or fund our grandkids to the best tutors or the best piano teachers. We only want to go to the best gym and we only shop name brand. Perhaps the most offensive thing to the world is waking up on a Sunday morning and confessing to being a poor, miserable, sinner. We would much rather be told to declare today as the start of our best life now and pray that God makes us rich beyond our wildest dreams, and without much toil while we're at it.

Now you certainly can shop name brand or root for the Yankees (it's no sin in the heavens, at least), but Jesus' warning is to not become so preoccupied with success that you leave yourself doomed to fail. I'll say it again: don't become so consumed by the pursuit of success that you leave yourself doomed to fail. That's not the way of the cross. The way of the cross is that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, and that we would point our fingers inward on ourselves and declare that I am the chief sinner. Our natural inclination is to pretend we've got our lives together so we can do things our way in order to *avoid* suffering and death, *and* consequently avoid resurrection. We want greatness on our terms, not the true greatness that comes

through and out of failure. **<Pause, soft>** In the kingdom of heaven, failing **<pause>** is succeeding. Weakness **<pause>** is power. Suffering... is glory.

This was Jesus' lesson for the disciples, and is the lesson for us today. They just spent the long time traveling between Galilee and Capernaum arguing about who is the greatest. Jesus asked what they were discussing, and they fell *silent*. Like middle school kids throwing eggs at their teacher's house and getting caught, they instantly knew they were in the wrong. And Jesus says, **"If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all."**

And Jesus brought before them a child, small enough to be taken up in Jesus' arms. Parents often dream of their little children growing up and becoming great and *changing* the world, who we can watch on TV and say "that's my boy." Or perhaps just great enough to have financial stability. But Jesus is saying that this child before them has *already* achieved greatness. For he receives without any worthiness in himself to receive. **<pause>** **Be** this child, but even more: **<pause>** **serve** this child, and all the *childlike* who have nothing to offer you in return, or just simply won't. Serve them as a labor of love, because our Lord Jesus labored for you in the highest love without any worthiness in you. The one who was truly greatest came not to be served, but to serve, and give his life as a ransom for many. He gave up His greatness to become last for the sick, the lowly, the ashamed, the suffering, the afflicted. He became last in order to scatter the proud in the imagination of their hearts and cast down the mighty from their

thrones. He became last in order to exalt the last, to make you first in the kingdom of heaven!

So Jesus casts the disciples from their thrones, but he doesn't leave them there...hopeless. He bears with their weaknesses and guides them to become more like children, being *gift-receivers*. Reading through the Gospel of Mark, you wonder if the disciples will ever *really* get this. If *you* need a testament to how patient our Lord is with you when you act foolishly, look no further than the persistent foolishness of the disciples. Here in this moment they're told to receive children, and just a chapter later in Mark, the disciples scold others for bringing children to Jesus. Slow to learn they are. Slow to learn we often are.

He doesn't so easily give up on the disciples, and he likewise never forsakes you. For you were born again in Baptism. You have new life as a child, a child of God. By dying and rising with him, you become last with him in order to be raised with him, receiving the *firstfruits* of the Spirit, while the proud apart from Christ are cast down to the lowest of lows prepared for the devil and *his* children, his angels.

So just as Jesus continued to guide and teach the disciples in spite of their foolishness, so too do we need to be taught, to be catechized, formed in the truth. The Christian life is a long one, full of suffering and heartache, jealousy and anger. You can't do it alone. You need Jesus, to put to death with Jesus and in Jesus how much you trust in your own good works, and instead look to your neighbor in need.

This doesn't happen overnight, but comes from a life of struggling against distractions, a life of struggling to learn God's Word, but struggling. It's funny. Our English words "struggle" and "strive" come from the same Greek word: ἀγωνίζομαι. This is where we get the word "agony." When we struggle, we tend to think that negatively. But the scriptures use this word positively. *Fight* the good fight. ἀγωνίζομαι the good fight. Agonize against sin. Struggle. Strive the good fight. ἀγωνίζομαι to enter through the narrow gate. Strive or struggle to enter through the narrow gate. So struggle and strive against sin and struggle and strive to learn evermore God's Word. That's what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, by seeking Him where He says He's found not merely in His Word, but in His Word *taught*.

Luther's catechism is designed for this purpose. It's for your daily use to keep you childlike in the faith, even as adults. Recall the 9th commandment on coveting. "We should fear and love God so that we do not scheme to get our neighbor's inheritance or house, or get it in a way which only appears right, but help and be of service to him in keeping it." Reflecting on these words, you may not have outwardly schemed to get your neighbor's inheritance or house, but you *have* resented your neighbor and ignored his needs in order to make *yourself* great and satisfy your desires alone. Repent. And believe the mercy that is **yours** and described so well in the 2nd article of the Creed, that since you *have* been redeemed from being lost and condemned, since you *are* purchased and won by Jesus' holy precious blood and his innocent suffering and death,

you are forgiven. You are set free from the punishment of sin in order to now love the Law, to love your neighbor, and satisfy his needs.

And again, just as Jesus was patient with his disciples, so he is patient with you.

<Long pause> Think of how a toddler babbles along, not using proper words or vocabulary, but communicates as best he can. His parents encourage him every step of the way saying, “Yes, my dear son, that is right. Keep going.” Similarly, Christ is pleased with your childlike desire to learn the vocabulary of the Bible, and the grammar of the Holy Spirit. Christ accepts your imperfect understanding and guides you to grow stronger in the faith over time, all the while interceding on your behalf before the Father, that even as you’re learning, and being corrected by the Holy Spirit, you are always living in the perfect forgiving righteousness of Jesus. In the name of Jesus.