

Mark 9:30-37

When I was a little girl, my mother said she was taking me for a surprise. We got into the car and headed in a northwest direction. Not yet old enough to have a grasp of Erie streets when she asked me to guess where we were going, I said, "To my accordion lesson." That made absolutely no sense, we didn't put my accordion into the car, and saying it was a surprise meant my mom expected me to think it was a good thing. It was a good thing; we went to see the movie Mary Poppins. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. He told his disciples straight out he was going there to die, yet they expected the exact opposite: they expected him to go to take over. They weren't willing to hear differently because it made no sense to them for Jesus to willingly go to his own death. They didn't understand what he meant when he said in three days he would rise.

On the way to Capernaum they had been arguing about who was the best. As they entered the house where they would be staying, Jesus asked his disciples, "What were you arguing about on the road?" But they kept quiet, says the writer of Mark's Gospel, because on the way they had argued about who was number one among them. So, the disciples were human just like you and I are human. Who doesn't want to stand out? Some of the greatest people who have ever lived were also among the most ambitious.

It is said that Michelangelo prayed: "Lord, grant that I may always desire more than I can accomplish." Abraham Lincoln often said to himself as a boy studying by the pine log fire at night: "I will study and get ready and perhaps my chance will come." And, indeed, it did come. People can succeed against all odds. Who can help but be impressed by the accomplishments, for example, of George Washington Carver? Carver was born to an African slave mother. He never knew his father. But he wanted to make a difference in the world, and he did! Carver became one the greatest scientists in American history.

The disciples were human beings. They wanted to sit in places of honor, to do the best job they could and have a title along with it. That's really not something unusual, we expect that if we are doing an outstanding job we should be recognized as well. There is nothing wrong with that as long it does not cause us to mistreat others or betray our values. My guess is Jesus wanted them to be ambitious because ambitious people get things done. He just wanted them to be ambitious in the right way (King Duncan, Collected Sermons, www.Sermons.com).

Many years ago, a piece of gossip was printed in a London newspaper about a famous painter and an equally famous writer: "James McNeil Whistler and Oscar Wilde were seen yesterday at Brighton talking, as usual, about themselves." When Whistler saw that little tidbit of gossip in the newspaper, he clipped it out and sent it to Oscar Wilde with a note that said, "I wish these reporters would be more accurate. If you remember, Oscar, we were talking about me." Oscar Wilde replied in a telegram that said, "It is true, Jimmy, we were talking about you but I was thinking of myself." Neither of these colorful men showed any embarrassment over their egocentric conversation.

But the disciples were embarrassed when Jesus asked them what they had been talking about as they journeyed to Capernaum, for they had been talking about which of them was the greatest. Jesus sat down and, as if they were children, called his disciples to gather around him. Then he said, "If any one would be first, he must be the last of all, a servant of all" (King Duncan, Collected Sermons, www.Sermons.com).

When Mike Peters, a noted cartoonist from the Dayton OH Daily News, won the Pulitzer Prize for political cartoons (1981), he wasn't expecting the honor. He described his response by saying, "It is like you are asleep and it is 2 in the morning and you are hugging your pillow and you are in your funny pajamas and somebody bursts through the door and they come over and start shaking you and they say, 'Wake up, wake up!' And you say, 'What is it?' And they say, 'You have just won the Boston Marathon!' And you say, 'But I'm not running in the Boston Marathon.' And they say, 'Doesn't make any difference, you won.'"

We can find at least one element that is common to both Mike Peters' analogy and the account in Mark 9. Jesus taught that heaven too will hold some surprises. Honor and glory will be granted for behavior that was so natural, so undistinguished, and so noncompetitive.

Take, for instance, the simple illustration of receiving a child in Jesus' name. He was talking about having a humble servant attitude, being willing to reach out and help the lowliest of people so that we might show them the love of Christ. Such simple acts will be greatly rewarded. Yes, many of God's children will be surprised to find that their faithful service has brought them top honors (Our Daily Bread, October 23, 1997).

To drive his point home Jesus picked up a child. To us this seems natural, we see a child in the home, and we think nothing of picking him or her up. It wasn't like that in the days of Jesus. We know women were considered property then, but children were worthless. I once had a teenager in youth group who asked her father to buy her a horse. He said he wouldn't have one of those "hay burners" on his farm. To the dad a horse was a useless animal who didn't earn its keep. That is how children were thought of in the days of Jesus. You'll notice Mark didn't bother to tell us if this child was a boy or a girl, calling the child "it". But Jesus said to the disciples, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Mother Teresa once had a group of European theologians visit her in Calcutta. She told them, "You try to do what I am doing, then you will be able to enjoy what I am doing." She took them to one of her childcare centers and picked up a child who was playing in the mud and gave the child a kiss. She waited for her guests to do the same. None of them did (King Duncan, Collected Sermons, www.Sermons.com). Mother Teresa was welcoming the child and in doing so, welcoming Christ, and the one who sent him.

Jesus said, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." We must be like servants. I think we tend to think of servants as weak people, but the servants were not weak. Servants had many tasks to carry out throughout the day and they had to be strong. Jesus was telling his disciples their life was not going to be easy but they were strong and would be able to accomplish much as long as they cared for others, put others before themselves.

Jesus turned their conversation around from wondering who would be the greatest in the kingdom to who would be the greatest servant. What a stunning contrast between the invitation to work for Jesus and our urge to work for ourselves. By becoming a servant Jesus teaches us there is greatness in service. A life of servanthood for Christ is never without him and grace. We, according to Martin Luther, are still sinful people but

“the love of God toward us is stronger than the dirt that clings to us” (*Luther’s Works*, Vol. 54, p. 70).
All glory be to God.