

Sermon Proper 20 2018

September 23, 2018

Mark 9: 30-37

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord, and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning the meditation is on the Gospel Lesson previously read.

**And when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you discussing on the way?” But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.** Being the greatest, it’s something often on our minds, isn’t it? How can we make sure we are the greatest? How can we make our kids the greatest? How can we make America great again?

And if we put ourselves in the shoes of the disciples we can perhaps imagine how they were arguing: Matthew had left a life of luxury, surely he was the greatest. John calls himself the disciple whom “Jesus loved,” and likewise he was with Jesus at those really momentous times, like the transfiguration. Maybe he was the greatest. Of course, then there’s Peter. We see him leading the church at Pentecost, maybe he’s really the greatest. Surely they all had their reasons for saying so. But thinking about this, what does it mean to be great? Is it to be the number one guy? Is it to be the wealthiest, the best looking, the best athlete?

If you were able to watch Meghan McCain’s eulogy for her father John a few weeks ago, there was something really theological about it that fits with this. She was talking about her dad, and about his life’s work. She talked about it having been described by the word love. Then she described this in particular in her own eyes. She said that to her, John McCain wasn’t the Navy Admiral, or the Congressman and Presidential candidate. Instead, he was her dad who loved her. He was the one who consoled her when bad things happened; the one who comforted her when she was hurt. He was the one who picked her up off the ground when she fell off the horse. He was the one who put her back on the horse, and showed such subtle satisfaction when she rode away without incident; all the more because she had fearfully objected such a hasty return to the possibility of falling again.

Now this is not a comment on John or Meghan McCain and their politics, but only to say that she got the idea right. After all look at Jesus’ words: **“If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.”** Meghan was saying that her

dad was this one who had all kinds of glory in the world, but he still came and served her.

Is that service how you think of greatness? Do you think of looking for ways to serve and care for those around you? And this is something that deserves some reflection. How so? Well on the one hand, as Luther says, we should evaluate our lives according to the commandments. In what vocations has God placed you? Serve there, serve all that you can there. For example, we forget that it is such a wonderful work for a mother to serve her child by changing the child's diaper. We forget that this child is in need of that change for its health and well-being, and the mother doing that is lowering herself to serve this infant. That's so ingrained in what it means to be a mother, that we forget how this fulfills this commandment. On the other hand we can look those who are in the greatest need, and we should look at them. We should look at those who are considered the lowliest and the neediest in society. We should look at the sick and the downtrodden; we should look at them and seek how we can serve them. In fact, that's the main thing we should draw from this is that it doesn't matter who we are or where we are, we can find ways to serve those around us.

In fact, something I often remind shut-ins who require others to serve them is that they still serve. First of all, they serve by prayer. What better thing when you cannot do so many things you'd like to than to serve your neighbors by carrying them before the throne of the almighty God, Creator of Heaven and Earth, and reminding Him of their needs? Second of all, I remind them that they are serving by being served. They are serving as a blessing to those people because it is a blessing to serve.

To be clear, I am not saying that I as an able-bodied 37 year should make it my habit to have others wait on me hand and foot, snapping my fingers that they do for me what I like. No, that's arrogance. But when one reaches that point when they have no other choice, and they lost their ability to take care of others, let alone themselves, they can find contentment in the vocation of providing the means for others to serve. Allowing oneself to be counted among the lowly is exactly what our Lord describes here.

Of course, as we meditate on that: being counted amongst the lowest, where do we see this played out to the greatest extent? In the life of Jesus Himself, right? Think about that. Think about Jesus' life as the Second Person of the Trinity before

the Incarnation. Before God became Man, what did He have? He had the riches, the comforts, the glories of heaven. He had the service of anyone He could choose. He had the power, and the majesty. He had it all. And He had that holiness that was utter perfection.

And what did He do? He gave all of that up. Where was He born? In the greatness of a palace, like a King? No, remember that's where the Magi sought Him, but He wasn't there. Instead He was in the manger. And His life, did He have the life of a King? Did He live in that comfort, with that honor? No. Until His ministry He likely worked with Joseph in carpentry. He likely didn't have the finest of accommodations, and all the more likely bore hands that demonstrated the harsh realities of callous-raising work and the curse of sin with the toiling of sweat on the brow. Then in His ministry what does He say? The Son of Man has no place to lay His head.

Finally, then, His death. What do we see there? Did He die in the comfort of a hospital bed with family surrounding Him and attendants caring for Him? No, instead He was naked. He was mocked. He was all but alone, nailed to a cross. Nailed with your sin placed upon His shoulders.

There's something particularly ironic about this: in that, He was made the least of all. In His death He was numbered with the criminals. Not with the Kings as He should have been, but with the dregs of society: the thieves and robbers. The reason I say this is so ironic is because of what was happening there. Listen to the words that Jesus spoke to His disciples: **“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.”** That word translated delivered literally means to be handed over, given over. For example, it's the word that Paul uses in Romans Chapter One when he talks about the pagans being handed over to their own sinful inclinations as they worshipped the created instead of the Creator. However, what's particularly interesting is that the dictionary that I used when translating included an option that said it could mean even to be given over to justice.

To put this into something concrete, I was reading about what was called the Denazification of Germany in conjunction with this, and the article said that as the Allies were investigating those who had the greatest influence in Germany toward Nazi ideology, the ones found guilty were given over to justice.

That is the Christ. He was given over to justice for sin. What we see is Him dying the death of a criminal, counted as one of them, given over for the justice of their sin, of your sin. He didn't do it, of course. He was innocent, of course. He was holy and righteous, but that sin was placed upon Him and He was given over for its justice. Just like Jeremiah said, He was that Lamb led to slaughter. Think about that. It would be like if you stood up in those trials at the Denazification and said that you would take the place of one of the criminals there, to bear his punishment. The difference, however, would be that you still deserve it. Of course, you don't deserve it for having contributed to the atrocities of Nazi Germany—and that's where we can make the connection—but you deserve pain and suffering for sin. Christ didn't. Instead, He willingly made Himself the lowest, made Himself the servant of all, made Himself that Lamb, taking our sin upon His shoulders—which by the way, as I'm often teaching you phrases, you should remember what we call this. We call it the vicarious atonement: Christ in our place, our vicar, atoning for our sins. But that's what He did on the cross.

But then what happened? He arose. And Christians, when He arose, we see He was made the greatest. The One who had made Himself last of all, lowest of all, Servant of all, He was raised and named the First in the Kingdom. He was given the Name that is above all Names so that at the Name of Jesus, every knee should bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of the Father. And that is such good news. Why? Because He is the head of His body the Church. The body to which you were joined. He has put that Name on you in your baptism. He has made you His own, joined you to Himself in those in-grafting waters. He has joined you to His resurrection there so that all that is His as He serves you is now yours as well. Likewise, He still serves you with His body and blood where you feast on the benefits of this work for you.

Now in that life, He calls you to live as He did. He calls you to serve as He did. He calls you humble yourself as He did. And by His grace He gives you His Spirit to do that. In fact, it is only by that Spirit that you can do that. It is only by His grace, which He too is glad to give without measure that you would never worry that you'll be missing out on something better. Instead, in that grace He shows you the greatest thing of all: that He made Himself the least of all the lambs, being slaughtered that He might carry you into the greatness of His Kingdom. As we consider that greatness, we surely see it is the greatest of all. Amen.