

Mark 9:30-37 (Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost/Proper 20—Series B)

“Your Status”

Lutheran Church of Our Redeemer, Enfield CT

September 19, 2021

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our text is the Gospel recorded in Mark 9:

³⁰And after He had gone out from there, He was traveling through Galilee and He did not want anyone to know ³¹for He was teaching His disciples and said to them, “The Son of Man will be delivered into the hands of people, and they will kill Him, and when He has been killed, after three days He will rise.” ³²But they did not understand the saying and they were afraid to ask Him. ³³And He came into Capernaum. And when they were in the house, He asked them, “What were you all discussing on the road?” ³⁴But they were silent, for they were discussing with one another on the road who was the greatest. ³⁵And after He sat down, He called the Twelve and said to them, “If anyone wants to be first, he will be last of all and servant of all.” ³⁶And after He had taken a child, He stood him in their midst, and taking Him in His arms, He said to them, ³⁷“Whoever receives one of such children for the sake of my name receives me. And whoever receives me, receives not me, but the One who sent me.”

The teacher stops her lecture. She stares with stern eyes at the two students in the back corner. “What were you talking about? Do you have something you want to share with the rest of the class?” Silence. Embarrassed, awkward looks on the students’ faces.

“What were you talking about with each other while we were on the road?” Jesus asked His disciples. “Do you have something you want to share?” Silence. Embarrassed, awkward looks on the students’ faces.

What the classroom teacher cannot know is what Jesus does know—what they were talking about. In this passing moment we get a glimpse of the deity of Christ. Jesus is true Man and true God who is all-knowing. He shows His disciples, even though they are silent, that He is well-aware of what they were talking about on the road—which of them was the greatest. Jesus knew! They didn’t need to say. And so, their Lord and Master continued to teach His disciples. The topic: what greatness means in the reign and rule of God.

The world considers greatness as being "better than." Being first means having control so that others do you bidding, even if they have to be forced to obey. Greatness is most often reflected in power and influence over others. That's just how it is among fallen humanity. People think too highly of themselves just as the disciples did in their discussion about who is the greatest among them (Rom. 12:3). You and I have as well. We often put ourselves ahead of others, believing that we are better than they are in one way or another. We are agitated when people get ahead based on their personality or their good looks or their gender while we work and hone skills and gain experience only to be passed over. "Nice guys finish last," we grumble and complain, because we want to finish first, we desire to be waited on. We want the promotion, the better pay. We want to advance. We want to be first, to be the greatest. That's just how it is among fallen humanity.

But that is not how it is among those under the reign and rule of God. And our sinful natures chafe against the thought. The reign and rule of God comes in seemingly weak and hidden ways. It's a reign where the first are last and servant of everybody. "Do you want to be great?" Jesus essentially asked the Twelve. "Then be last of all and servant of all like this child." It's counter cultural. It's "counter-natural," with "natural" being our fallen state in which we fear, love, and trust in ourselves and put ourselves first and seek to be better than everyone.

But to be last of all and servant of all like a little child? That's . . . that's . . . humiliating. It sure is! In the ancient Near East children were the weakest, most vulnerable members of society. They were always the first to suffer from famine, war, and disease. Within the family and community, children had little status. While a minor, a child was on par

with a slave. And it is a child that Jesus embraces in His arms. Given the lowly status of children in the culture, Jesus identifies with that lowliness and lack of personal status as He Himself is the Suffering Servant.

It is Jesus, who, “though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:6–8 ESV). Almighty God—truly the Greatest—took on human flesh by the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin Mary. He humbled Himself to come among fallen humanity and to serve us with the very gift of Himself into the humiliating death of crucifixion. On the cross, Jesus died the death of a rebellious slave. The Romans crucified Spartacus and his rebellious slaves on the Appian Way for everyone to see from Capua to Rome (Appian, *The Civil Wars* 1.120). A long row of crosses with rebellious slaves fastened to them must have discouraged other slaves from similarly revolting against their masters.

But Jesus had not revolted against His Master. Jesus had not sinned against God or people. No, Jesus took the station of a little child, assumed the vocation of a servant, so that all people might receive the forgiveness of their sins of pride and self-glorification. “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45 ESV). Christ put us first, chief of sinners though we be, in order that we might no longer be slaves of Satan, sin, and death. The First became last of all and servant of all for you so that your sins are forgiven. You have new life. That’s how it works in the reign and rule of God.

Under the reign and rule of God through our Lord Jesus Christ, we are called to a new life of servanthood. In that “reverse greatness” of the reign, we are greatest when we are servants of Christ as we relate not only to our fellow Christians but also to those who are not yet disciples of the Lord Jesus. Rather than competition or comparison by the standards of the world, we are empowered by the Gospel of Jesus’ death and resurrection to look at one another with the eyes of Christ and realize that, when we see someone who is struggling or hurting or alone and in desperate need, we are able to be the hands and mouth and feet of Christ as we embrace that person with actions of love and care and support by supplying what they need physically and spiritually.

Terri Bentley shared the following as a devotion on the LWML website. It illustrates for us an aspect of being a servant. Terri wrote, “Recently, during the children’s message at our church, a grandmother walking with a cane took two rambunctious preschoolers to the front to listen. She had her hands full, to say the least. Even though she was able to hang onto the two-year-old, the three-year-old broke loose and scampered around as little boys are wont to do. He made it to the pulpit parament and gave it a tug. The pastor quickly straightened it again, but no one deterred the youngster as he continued his exploration.

I, along with many others, I’m sure, was sitting in church thinking, “Why doesn’t somebody do something to help?” Obviously, this lady had her hands full and could have used some assistance. I wasn’t sitting close to the front nor did I know the little guy and his family well. Surely, somebody else would be more capable of helping her than I. But then it hit me. I **was somebody**. I couldn’t just sit here and think “somebody should do something,” while I just sat and watched.

So I brushed past my husband who was sitting on the aisle and walked to the front and sat in the first pew, behind the little guy, and scooped him into my lap. I talked to him softly and he stilled to listen to what the pastor had to say. When the sermon was finished, he took my hand and, as we walked back to where the family was sitting together, he smiled up at me all the way.

I must say, I was still disappointed that no one else made a move to assist in this situation. I didn't want anyone congratulating me for what I did, because I was still scolding them in my mind for not offering to help. When several did say something to me after church, I could only respond, "Well somebody had to do something." I must admit that was probably not the most Christian thing I could say. A more appropriate response would probably have been to point to God and declare it was all for His glory. But I really wasn't feeling that way.

Why don't we jump to help when we have the time, resources, or money to do so? I know going up there during the children's message was a risk. What if the little guy freaked out and screamed at this relative stranger putting him on her lap? I could not even tell you his name. But when God is tugging at your heart to act, you can't just sit there thinking "somebody should do something." We must be the **somebody** that God wants to send.

In Matthew 25 . . . Jesus emphasizes the importance of extending ourselves to each other when we see a need—in instances such as hunger, thirst, being a stranger, naked, sick,

or being in prison. Are we responding to the needs of our fellow human beings? . . . Look to be that **somebody** so others can see Jesus in you.”¹

Be the last of all and servant of all. One of the most enduring and beloved pictures of all time is “Jesus with the Children.” This picture clearly shows Jesus’ love for the “least of these” of His day. It illustrates His love for you and me whom He has made children of the heavenly Father by grace through faith in Jesus’ saving life, death, and resurrection. We are God’s children who have received forgiveness of sins and the new life that enables us to be servants in Jesus’ name to all people. When you see this picture of Christ and the children, see yourself, not only as a child of God in Christ, but also one who serves the “least of these,” whoever they may be in whatever need that they might have. You who, in Christ Jesus, are last of all and servant of all are indeed the greatest in showing love and mercy. Amen.

¹*Be Somebody* by Terri Bentley, Garden Valley, Idaho. Published by Lutheran Women’s Missionary League, 2014, <https://lwml.org>