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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Pentecost 18 (Proper 20B), Series B
Saturday, September 22, 2018
Sunday, September 23, 2018

Sermon: Jesus, the Servant of All
Text: Mark 9:30-37; James 3:13–4:10

Focus: The Lord Jesus became the Servant of all when he laid down his life on the cross.
Function: That they would
Structure: Story-Framed
Locus: “I believe that Jesus Christ... has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person...” (SC, 2nd Article of Apostles’ Creed).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. The mid-term election cycle is in full swing. You cannot turn on the television or even check your e-mail account without beholding a bevy of political campaign ads. (I even received a text message from a campaign earlier this week. How did they get my phone number?!) Campaign ads tend to boast of their candidates’ qualifications and belittle and bemoan the voting record and character of their opponents. Sometimes our terrible options seem like a choice between the devil you know and the devil you don’t. Either way, the whole thing can become outright diabolical. For whether it’s the governor’s race, the senate race, congress, attorney general, or county commissioner, we are about the business of deciding who is the greatest.

Coincidentally, even in our church body, The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, we are gearing up for denominational elections next summer. I received an e-mail this week from Synod HQ indicating that it’s time for the congregation to start deliberating whom to nominate. Who do we elect to be our next *Synod* President? Who among all the pastors of our church is truly “the greatest”? Rev. Matthew Harrison has been our president for 9 years now (three

terms). Should we reelect him, or is it time to oust him in favor of a new guy? Out with the old, in with the new? Or shall we stick with the tried and true? Who is the greatest?

That's the question argued by the disciples in our Gospel lesson from Mark 9. "For on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest" (Mark 9:34b, ESV).¹ On the one hand, it seems like a perfectly natural discussion. After all, as fallen, sinful human beings, we are always trying to boast and best one another, jockeying for position and trampling others in our climb to the top. We do this at school, at work, in sports—and even in church. I cannot tell you how many times a church member has tried to make me beholden to them by saying, "Pastor, you better do what I say—or else! After all, I give thousands of dollars to this church." To which, I usually smile and reply, "Thank you! So do I."

Pastors, by the way, are also not immune from the temptation to be the greatest. Preachers (and churches) love to measure their success by counting "nickels and noses," that is, offering amounts and average weekly attendance. When two pastors meet one another for the first time, it probably takes less than a minute before the conversation turns to church attendance. After boasting of his congregation's size, one pastor inquires of the other, "How many do *you* worship on a Sunday?" 50? 100? 200? 500? 5,000? I have come up with the best answer of all to this question. When somebody asks *me*, "How many does Epiphany worship on Sunday?", I answer, "We only worship One. His name is Jesus!"

Yes, the disciples knew that Jesus was a big deal, and they didn't want to be left out of the fame and fortune when his kingdom finally came. They wanted the best seats in the house (cf. 10:35-37). They wanted to bask in the glow of Jesus' glory. But they were not content to be

¹ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

in the inner circle of Jesus' twelve apostles. Even among the Twelve, they wanted to figure out who was the greatest.

Their debate could not have come at a possibly worse time. Coming down the Mount of Transfiguration (9:2-8) and passing through Galilee, Jesus gave his second so-called Passion Prediction, in which he told 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" (Mark 9:31). Jesus just got done telling them that he was *going to die!* And, yes, he would rise again, but he was still going to *die*. And revealing more than he did in his first Passion Prediction, Jesus added the fact that he was "going to be delivered into the hands of men." That is, someone from his own group was going to *betray* him. And all of that was lost on the disciples. They didn't understand, and they were afraid to ask (v. 32). They didn't want to think about Jesus' ominous oracle. So instead they decided to debate which of them was the greatest.

When Jesus confronted them, "they kept silent" (v. 34). They were rightly ashamed of themselves. The Bible says that jealousy and rivalry are Satanic. As James states in our epistle:

"But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice" (Jas. 3:14-16).

Jealousy and selfish ambition are *not* of God! They're earthly and unspiritual. James goes so far as to call them *demonic!* The disciples argument about who was the greatest would not end well. It could only lead to jealousy, division, and bad blood. Such conversations have absolutely no place in the life of the Church or the hearts of Jesus' followers.

So Jesus had to set them straight. "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all" (Mark 9:35). The greatest in the kingdom of God is not the one who clobbers and clambers their way to the top, but rather the one who humbles himself to serve others. Greatness

in the kingdom of God is marked by humility, not hubris; and poverty, not pride. This is the upside-down and inside-out reality of our life together in Christ. “Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted” (Matt. 23:12). The first shall be last, and the last shall be first (Mark 10:31). (*Aside: Is that why so many of you sit in the back row of the church?!*)

The greatest Christian leaders are not the ones who sell the most books or make the most money or preach to the biggest congregations. The greatest Christian leaders are the ones who humble themselves and devote their lives to loving others and giving the glory to God. They don't need to garner accolades or awards or thank-you notes. They don't need a book deal with a major publisher. They don't count their impact by how many Likes they get on their Facebook page or YouTube channel. Instead, they put others first—and Jesus first of all. It's not a matter of poor self-esteem and thinking little of themselves. It's about thinking about themselves less often and thinking more of the one who died for them. John the Baptist, Martin Luther, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Eric Liddell, and Mother Theresa are heroes of the Christian faith not because they made much of themselves, but because they made much of Christ.

Jesus says, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all” (Mark 9:35). That's what Jesus did for us. Even though he was the eternal Son of God and the Creator of the universe, the Creator became a creature in the Incarnation. Christ left behind his throne in heaven and descended to manger here on earth. He worked as a humble carpenter for the first 30 years of his life, submitting to his parents' will. He touched lepers and broke bread with prostitutes. And then, when he finally had opportunity to “rise to the occasion,” he ascended a cross and died—exactly as he predicted and promised. “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” (Mark 9:31).

Jesus was first, but he made himself last and least to save us from our sins. He died for you, not because you were so great and spectacular, but because in his great love for you, he made you lovely. “He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor” (1 Sam. 2:8). “He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate” (Luke 1:52). Jesus lifts us up out of our miry sin and puts us in a place of honor—not because we deserve it, not because we earned it, not even because we *asked* for it, but simply because he wants to give us grace.

As if to underscore this point, when Jesus was teaching his disciples, he placed a child in their midst and hugged him. And then he said, “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me” (Mark 9:37).

Children depend on others for everything. Babies can’t feed themselves, clothe themselves, or provide their own shelter. Children need other people to take care of them. From a strictly economical, transactional point of view, children have nothing to offer. Yet Jesus says that our goal as Christians should be to serve helpless people like children, people who have no intrinsic utilitarian value, and yet are nevertheless among the most valued by God. “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me” (Mark 9:37).

How do we receive a child in Jesus’ name? By bringing them to the waters of Holy Baptism. By welcoming them to worship, instead of shushing them and shooing them away. By bringing them to Sunday school so they can hear, believe, and grow in God’s Word. And by

spending whatever amount of time, energy, money, and effort is necessary to help keep them in the Christian Church as they get older.

Maybe instead of searching out honor and power in the Church, we should seek instead what we can do in the church to love and serve others—above all, the children and youth! What can we do that will benefit the lowest and least in our church and community? Instead of asking what can I get out of church, let's ask, what can we *give* to our church to help its mission to love and serve and spread the Gospel? How can we welcome the children in Jesus' name instead of ignoring them or driving them away? How can we help the youth mature into faithful servant-leaders in Christ's Church?

We need to pray for our children and youth, mentor them, laugh with them, cry with them, and spend time with them in Scripture. We need to help them learn the servant mindset that Jesus holds forth in our Gospel: "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all" (Mark 9:35).

Jesus was first, but he made himself last. "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). Who is the greatest? Jesus, the servant of all! In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.