

Mark 9:30-37
"Servant of All"
Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 23, 2018
First Lutheran Church, Glencoe, Minn.
Pastor Peter Adelsen

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen!

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

[Intro]

Jesus said to His disciples, ***"If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all"*** (Mark 9:35b).

Most of us want to be first. We like receiving that blue ribbon or gold trophy given to us. After all, as Ricky Bobby says in Talladega Nights, "If you're not first, you're last." Or, you may be familiar with the phrase: "Second is the first loser."

We do like to win. We like being the first.

There are many people noted as being the first this or first that. They are famous for being first. The Wright Brothers were the first to fly a powered plane. Amelia Earhart was the first woman to make a transatlantic solo flight. Neil Armstrong was the first man on the moon. John Jay was the first US Supreme Court chief justice. Thurgood Marshall was the first African American to be on the Supreme Court. Sandra Day O'Connor was the first female on the Supreme Court.

Being first marks you in the history books. But did these people become the first by accident or did they want to be known as the first?

Then there are those who desire being known. These people make sure that everyone knows what they are up to. They enjoy the attention.

Recently, NBA player LeBron James helped open an elementary school in Akron, Ohio, which is a public school for at-risk students called the "I Promise School." This is a great achievement for anyone, but he appeared to make sure everyone knew who opened the school. He was all over the national news receiving praise. The news was proclaiming he was donating all the money to fund the school. He even praised himself on his "King James" Twitter account.

Then reality set in, Akron taxpayers are footing at least 75 percent¹ of the costs to run the LeBron James “I Promise School.” The Akron taxpayers should be thankful to James, but they should receive some of the credit, since they are paying the bulk of the costs.

Then there was a man named John Rockefeller, Jr. Everyone knew he was the richest man in the world when we ran Standard Oil, but what he did with his money was a secret. Instead of wanting praise, he was behind the scenes funding reconstruction and renovations of the Palace of Versailles in France following World War I and funding the reconstruction of Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia. He funded many other projects, as well, while much of it was kept secret until after he died.

[Humble and Exalted]

We, as sinners, enjoy being praised. This makes us feel good inside. And, it is good to be praised from time to time. But, as Christians, we shouldn't do good works in order to receive praise. We instead do good works to praise God and benefit our neighbor. After all, our works cannot reconcile us with God or obtain grace – even if we find a cure for cancer or end world hunger. We only receive grace through faith alone when you believe that your sin is forgiven for Christ's sake, who alone is the mediator to reconcile us to the Father. For as the Apostle Paul wrote, “***(Grace) is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast***” (Ephesians 2:9).

And, as we read in today's Epistle, James wrote, “***God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble***” (James 4:6). So, as followers of Christ, we are to “***humble ourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you***” (James 4:10).

How can this be? How could anyone be humble and be exalted?

This idea is totally against the American state of mind. We are told that if we are to succeed in life, we need to fight for it. It is all about survival of the fittest. We need to earn that raise by any means necessary. Sometimes when we seek a raise or a better job we do so by hurting our fellow employee's reputation, who at that moment we forget is our neighbor, who we are to protect. So, instead of being honest, we turn back to the sin of self-importance.

¹ https://www.cleveland.com/metro/index.ssf/2018/08/whos_paying_for_lebron_james_n_1.html

[The Focus on Ourselves]

We do like to focus on ourselves. It is what we are best at, after all. This is exactly what Christ's disciples wound up doing.

Jesus taught His disciples again about his future martyrdom, saying, ***“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).

His disciples appeared to have listened to half of that teaching. For immediately, they began whispering among each other along the way to Capernaum about the future line of succession, arguing who was the greatest among them.

You see, they heard Jesus say He would die. That is why they were ***“arguing with one another about who was the greatest”*** (Mark 9:34). But, they closed their ears to what Jesus said next: ***“After three days he will rise”*** (Mark 9:31b).

It was like Jesus was speaking in one ear and out the other. But, do you know who heard the disciples jockeying for position? Jesus.

Yes, Jesus the Son of God, who is all-knowing. Yes, Jesus the Son of Man, who has ears to hear. He heard it all: either by the vocal conversation or by reading their hearts, for He is God in the flesh, after all.

So, Jesus nicely asked his disciples, ***“What were you discussing along the way?”*** (Mark 9:33). And what was their response back? Nothing. Not a peep.

This is almost comical when you think about it. Here we have grown men, who are ashamed to speak about what they had said to each other. These are grown men acting like guilty schoolboys before the teacher.

Well, the reason they didn't say anything is likely because they knew Jesus would not approve of their conversation.

You see, the disciples were thinking of worldly power, rather than the heavenly kingdom that Jesus was ushering in. They were coveting the power of leading in the place of Jesus. This was causing conflict within the disciples.

So, if the disciples weren't willing to speak, Jesus would. So, Jesus sat them down and said to them, "***If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all***" (Mark 9:35).

Here, Jesus is speaking of Himself. He is the literal first and last. He is the alpha and the omega. He is the beginning and the end. He is the first and last, because He is the Son of Man. He is God in the flesh. He is the almighty Creator, but He is in the form of a servant.

Jesus could have used His almighty power to force His creation to serve Him, but He didn't. Jesus came as the Son of Man not to be served, but to serve.

In English, we lose some of the meaning of the word "***servant***" when Jesus says, "***servant of all.***" In Greek, there are multiple words for servant. The one used here is διάκονος (diakonos), which means one who is intent on the service he is rendering to others.

So, the ranking and standing of a disciple with Jesus is determined by the way in which he makes himself a minister of all.

So, when we do something good, we should not do it for the praise of others, but just to help our neighbor. We do good without even thinking that we are doing good. We just do it as who we are as human beings.

[Serve]

One summer while in college, I worked at a McDonald's restaurant.

On this particular day, it was a slow afternoon and the manager was refilling the shake mix into the ice cream machine. As he was refilling the machine, suddenly he dropped the shake mix all over the floor. It was a gooey and sticky mess.

Without thinking, I went over to help him clean up the mess.

Now, you may have done a similar thing in your job or at school, like picking up your classmate's books after they fell to the floor, or just opening the door for those behind you, or greeting people you don't know with a smile.

You were just there. You didn't think about it. You just did it.

[Servant of All]

Jesus Christ has shown us what it means to be a servant of all. Although He is God, ***“He did not count equality with God as something that could be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking on 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”*** (Ephesians 2:6-8).

As the Son of Man and servant of all, Christ faced hunger and thirst, just like us. He felt the pain of those nails being pierced through His flesh and bone as he hung on the cross, as he bore our sin. He felt the sting of death. But through His death, He destroyed the power of death through His rising to life three days later, as He said He would.

Jesus did all of this to serve us – His beloved creatures. He died and rose again to reconcile everyone who has fallen, due to the sin of Adam and Eve. He has brought us back. He has bought us back.

We are reminded at how Christ serves us at each Divine Service. At the beginning of the service, we remember that we were purchased at our baptism when the pastor says the invocation, “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

We are later reminded that God forgives our sins when we repent of those sins. We are reminded that we are covered in Christ’s righteousness.

As the service moves from Law and Gospel with the hymns, readings and sermon, we are reminded at what God has done and continues to do as He serves us.

Then, when we receive Christ’s true body and true blood at this altar, we are being served again by God. You see, in the Lord’s Supper, we receive forgiveness of sins and strengthening of our faith as Christ serves us.

This is why our liturgy is called the Divine Service, because the Triune God is here serving His people.

And so we respond in humility, because God is great and almighty, the Creator of everything, and He serves us.

So, through Christ's life on earth, we see how we can live in service and humility to others. We serve by fearing and loving God and loving our neighbor, so that we would defend their reputation and speak well of them and explain everything in the kindest way to them.

We follow Christ as we serve our neighbor and not for fame or glory, but with humble meekness, so if we would be first, we would be last of all and servant of all. Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

✠ SOLI DEO GLORIA ✠