

The Sermon for the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 9:30-37

September 20, 2009

In today's Gospel, Jesus took His disciples away by themselves. During these times Jesus devoted Himself to the last, intensive training of the twelve. He knew that time was growing short. He would soon make that last Passover pilgrimage to Jerusalem where He would offer Himself on the cross as a sacrifice for our sins. He had much to teach before that happened.

Jesus taught His disciples 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."* When we, with our 20/20 hindsight, hear these words, we are tempted to say, "What could be clearer?" Never the less, the Gospel says: *They did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him.* How could the disciples miss the meaning of these words?"

It is easy for us to be critical, but we really need to cut the disciples a little slack.

Every Sunday, every festival, every Christian wedding, every Christian funeral, every time faithful pastors preach, they proclaim Christ crucified for the forgiveness of sins and raised from the dead to open the way to heaven. This is the beginning, middle, and end of the Christian faith. When the Holy Spirit plants faith in a Christian, Christ crucified and risen from the grave becomes the core of being. Christ's core teaching of justification by faith becomes the center from which all other teachings of the Christian faith receive their authority. As Christians, we believe, teach, and confess that we are justified before God only by faith in the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ for us.

With the suffering, death, and resurrection at the core of everything we do as Christians, it is often difficult for Christians to imagine the state of mind of God's people during the time leading up to these salvation events. Back then, the people knew that Jesus was the Messiah, but they did not know what that meant. It did not enter their minds that the Messiah would be executed by the state. Too often, their idea of salvation was salvation from the tyranny of Rome, not the tyranny of sin. Too often, their idea of the Kingdom of God was a return to the theocracy of Israel under Moses or King David. They did not understand the words of Jesus to Pontius Pilate:

[John 18:36] "My kingdom is not of this world."

Given that we have 20/20 hindsight, why is it that we still fall into the same trap that the disciples demonstrated in the second part of today's Gospel? As Jesus and His disciples returned to their headquarters in Capernaum, *Jesus 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.*

The disciples had not yet witnessed the crucifixion and the resurrection. They did not understand that Jesus must die for their sins. They did not yet have the complete picture. They were jockeying for positions of importance in God's Kingdom as they saw it. Yes, they were wrong. They were acting out of selfishness and pride. But at least they were consistent with the way they perceived the world. They did not understand Jesus' words and their errors were consistent with that misunderstanding.

Jesus used the discussion among the disciples as an opportunity to teach them **and us** what it means to be a leader in His church. *"If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all."* In God's family, the leader serves. The one who is the highest makes himself the lowest. The leader in God's family sacrifices not to get power, but to serve others.

Jesus nailed this point home by taking a child in His arms and telling the disciples to serve the child. *"Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me."* With these words, Jesus tells us that anyone who cares for a child is caring for God, for the one who sent Jesus is none other than God the Father Himself.

When Jesus used the child as an example, He was emphasizing what He meant by serving all people. He was talking about the entire spectrum of society. He was not only asking us to serve those who are young physically, but also those who are young spiritually or mentally even though they live in older bodies. He was asking us to serve **all** people.

So, how are we doing? Are we willing servants? If we are servants, do we serve because we want to share God's love with others or do we serve so that people will notice us and tell us how wonderful we are? Do we get angry when we serve, especially when people fail to acknowledge our contribution? Do we serve with all our heart or is our service only skin deep? How are we doing as servants? I've got to admit that I am a lousy servant. How about you?

Here is a current struggle with which I am wrestling. I have found that I am a very “event driven” person. I rejoice when an event that I have helped plan accomplishes the goals that were set and those who participate are blessed. For example, a recent event that brought great joy to my heart was the Bridge Builders weekend. It was everything I hoped it might be as those who participated were fully engaged in the process and celebrated new skills in caring for others with confidence.

One reason that I agreed to chair the Division of Congregational Health for the ND District was because of my passion for impacting the lives of God’s people for the better. The Lord has surrounded me with an excellent team of pastors and lay people on the Division. I am humbled and honored to serve with them. I believe that “Building The Home – 24:15” is going to be a great event. Our stated goal is this: Recognizing that healthy churches are enhanced by healthy families, the goal of “Building the Home – 24:15” is to equip families with skills to promote spiritual health within the home. We have invited speakers from as far away as Seward, NE and St. Louis, MO to make this an event that will truly help families with some of those daily struggles, whether it relates to being a parent or a spouse. Our key-note speaker from Seward, NE will address special concerns of families including raising children as a single parent and in step families. He will also focus on the truth that the home, not the Church, is the seed bed for Christian life. He will demonstrate what a “Home-Centered, Church Supported” ministry looks like. I pray that “Building The Home – 24:15” is an great success, not so that I can say, “Hey, look what my division did,” but so that families who are hurting and parents that have questions can be served and blessed through the event. My concern right now might seem like a selfish one. I’m not sure if the event is going to take place. Apart from members of the planning committee, we currently have one family who has registered.

Yes, my ego would be damaged if we had announce the cancellation of the event for lack of interest. However, my greater disappointment would be the missed opportunity for our families to be served. While we may be doing a great job of nurturing the faith of our children and families, I firmly believe that we can always learn more and serve better and more intentionally when it comes to serving our children, grandchildren, and other family members. So, I would ask that you prayerfully consider attending “Building the Home – 24:15” not for me and for my ego, but that you might be blessed to be a blessing for those nearest and dearest to you.

Yes, there are times when we think we got it all figured out as a parent or spouse. Sadly, there are times when we also think we are “Greater” than God’s Word. How do we respond when a loving brother or sister points out that we are not in agreement with the teachings of Christ? Do we thank them and confess our error before God and receive His forgiveness? Or do we become angry and stubborn? Do we label others as divisive when we are the ones who have caused the division by straying from the teachings of Christ? Are we arrogant enough to place ourselves in judgment over the very word of God rather than submit to it in humility?

What is our excuse? Unlike the disciples, we know that Christ died on the cross for our sins. We know that He rose from the dead. We have heard this Gospel before and we know that the role of a Christian is to serve others. Never the less, we are still arrogant. We even consider ourselves to be judges of God when His teachings are not what we want them to be. We consider ourselves to be the greatest even greater than the teachings and revelation of the God who created us.

Even though we are arrogant and self-righteous, God still wants to rescue us. He still wants us to be part of His family. He still wants to rescue us from our own arrogance and all our other sins. That is why He sent His Son to become one of us in this world.

God sent His son to be the servant we could never be. The Holy Spirit inspired Isaiah to speak of Him before He was even born: *[Isaiah 52:13; 53:3-6]* *Behold, my servant shall act wisely; he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted. He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*

God came down to this earth to serve us and we beat Him, whipped Him, and hung Him on a cross. Never the less, He served us perfectly. He deserved service from us, but He served us with His life. He sacrificed Himself in order to save us from our sins. Although He deserved to be first, He made Himself last for us. This perfect servant who sacrificed Himself for us is Jesus Christ - the same Jesus Christ who hugged children and told us to receive them as we would receive God the Father.

Jesus Christ, the perfect servant, sacrificed Himself on the cross in order to save us from the condemnation of our imperfect service. God the Father honored the service of His sacrifice by calling him out of the grave. Christ rose from the dead to eternal life. God the Father now sees our service as perfect. For Christ's sake, He now deems us worthy to receive Him even if it is in the guise of a little child.

Jesus Christ, our savior who was once dead, but now lives forevermore, continues to serve us today. He serves us daily with the forgiveness of our sins. He serves us with His Word, the Holy Scriptures. He serves us with His life giving body and blood in, with, and under the bread and wine of the sacrament. Finally, when the last day comes, He will serve us with a new, holy body that will rise from the dead just as He rose and we will finally serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.

As we wait for that day, let the words that the Holy Spirit gave to St. Paul inspire us: ^[Philippians 2:4-11] ⁵ *Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus,* ⁶ *who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,* ⁷ *but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.* ⁸ *And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.* ⁹ *Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name,* ¹⁰ *so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,* ¹¹ *and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

Amen