

September 19, 2021
Mark 9:30-37

Pentecost 17
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“True Greatness”

“Whoever wants to be first among you must be last of all and servant of all.”

The large mounds of dirt created by home builders in my childhood neighbourhood gave us the perfect venue for one of our favourite childhood games: “King of the Hill.” It is a fairly simple but very violent game; everyone started at the bottom of the hill, and when someone shouted “Go!” everyone fought, kicked, pushed, and used every means at their disposal to get to the top and therefore be crowned “king of the hill” (and yes, we did have several “queens of the hill,” since the girls in our neighbourhood could be as rough as the boys!). It was a fun -if somewhat rough – game to play as children, but one that we eventually grew out of as we got older; I can only imagine what it would look like if a group of adults decided to engage in such a contest, pushing and clawing their way up a mound of dirt to declare themselves “king/queen of the hill”! As St. Paul writes, *“when I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.”* (1 Corinthians 13:11).

But how often do adults, in their efforts to get ahead – to become the “king/queen of the hill” – act like children playing childish games? How many people devote their lives to become what they perceive to be the “greatest,” to do whatever it takes to rise to the top? So many people devote so much time and energy, use whatever means they believe are necessary to get to the top of the heap, even if it means stepping over others so that they might ascend to this position they perceive to be superior and desirable. They may achieve their goal and get to the top – but as Jesus asks, *“what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?”* (Matthew 16:26). They may discover that the hill of which they are king or queen is nothing more than a worthless pile of dirt, and all they have done is win a contest that they should have stopped playing when their childhood games had ended.

In today’s Gospel lesson, the disciples appear to be caught in this childhood way of thinking about getting ahead and being named the “greatest.” Jesus and his disciples are on a journey at the beginning of the lesson: *“They went on from there and passed through Galilee”* (Mark 9:30). The return through Galilee from Caesarea Philippi to Jerusalem is not an occasion for a new mission but for instruction of the disciples; this is why Jesus *“did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples”*

(9:30-31). The mention of Galilee is significant, for Galilee is the place from which Jesus calls persons to follow him (*“Follow me and I will make you fish for people.”* – 1:17), to which he bids them return to watch for his coming (*“But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee”* – 14:28) and through which he leads his own disciples. In this moment, care for his own disciples takes precedence over his compassion for the crowds; *“it is a moment of withdrawal from the crowd designed to help Jesus’ followers understand the journey.”* (Lamar Williamson Jr.). This teaching is the second of his passion predictions, where he states to his followers that *“the Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again”* (9:31). The briefest, and perhaps oldest, of the passion predictions is the most sweeping of the three; all humankind (*“human hands”*) is implicated in the death of the one who came to die for all. Jesus declares that he will be “betrayed, delivered” (*paradidomi*), which early Christians understood not only as an expression of the divine necessity of Jesus’ death (*“He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will not with him also give us everything else?”* – Romans 8:32) but also their own inevitable experience in the service of the gospel (*“For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus made be made visible in our mortal flesh.”* – 2 Corinthians 4:11). As we heard Jesus proclaim in last week’s Gospel lesson, *“if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”* (8:34).

Each of the three passion predictions in this section of Mark’s Gospel is followed by instructions on discipleship and incidents that show the disciples have not understood Jesus’ teaching. Peter responds to Jesus’ first passion prediction by taking Jesus aside and rebuking him (8:32); here, *“they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him”* (8:32). The Twelve in Mark’s Gospel never seem to understand Jesus (*“And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened”* – 6:52). Peter’s last words in this Gospel are his declaration that *“I do not know or understand what you are talking about”* (14:68); fear and silence conclude the Gospel when the women flee from the empty tomb (*“So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”* – 16:8).

- “As for the disciples’ fear to ask, that too is true to form; throughout Mark they are scared spitless. Those with faith in Jesus have nothing to fear, but not once does Mark ever attribute faith to the Twelve.” – C. Clifton Black.

When Jesus and the disciples arrive in Capernaum, he asks them “*what were you arguing about on the way?*” (8:33). The word “arguing” implies private remarks or asides that are not intended to be overheard (“*At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, ‘Why do you raise such questions in your hearts?’*” – 2:8). The disciples are struck dumb with embarrassment, “*for on the way they were arguing with one another who was the greatest*” (8:34). This episode shows the disciples’ incredible lack of perception; their silence shows that they recognize that a dispute over greatness is not appropriate. They recognize the discrepancy between Jesus’ denial of self and their own desire for self-aggrandizement as they argue about which one of them is “king of the hill.” “*The picture is clear: those with the greatest benefit of Jesus’ instruction set for themselves low standards and consistently fail to achieve them.*” (Black).

Unlike his response to Peter’s reaction to the first passion prediction (“*Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.*” – 8:33) Jesus chooses not to rebuke or chastise the disciples for their reaction to his second prediction of his passion, death, and resurrection. Instead, Jesus responds to their behavior with two sayings with two independent sayings, showing that he knows what they were discussing even though they do not admit that they were “*arguing with each other who was the greatest*” (9:34), engaging in their own version of “king of the hill.” Sitting before speaking, Jesus puts himself in the formal position of a teacher (“*When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.*” – Matthew 5:1). What follows is an authoritative word about rank among Jesus’ followers: “*Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.*” (9:35). The reversal of values, to measure greatness by lowly service, will characterize both Jesus’ example of servanthood and his command that his followers look not to be served but to serve:

- “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.” – Philippians 2:5-8.
- “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” – Mark 10:42-45.

The second example is even more surprising for a religious teacher and his male disciples: Jesus takes a little child from the household and puts it among them; then, *“taking it in his arms, he said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me’ (9:36-37).* Children are valued members of both their families of origin and the family of faith that is the Church; we baptize infants and young children in the Lutheran Church because we believe that Holy Baptism *“is necessary, that grace is offered through it, and that one should also baptize children, who through such baptism are entrusted to God and become pleasing to him.”* (Augsburg Confession, Article IX). But in the ancient world, a child was considered a non-person; Paul reflects this viewpoint in Galatians when he states that *“my point is this: heirs, as long as they are minors, are not better than slaves, though they are the owners of all the property; but they remain under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father.”* (Galatians 4:1-2). Children traditionally would have been with the women of the household, not hanging around with the teacher and his students; this explains what happens when *“people were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them, and the disciples spoke sternly to them.”* (10:13). To insist that receiving a child might have some value for male disciples is almost inconceivable; after all, *“a child epitomizes the most subservient human in ancient society, one with slightest status”* (Black). For these status-conscious disciples who have recently engaged in a verbal battle over who is the “king of the hill” among them, the idea that welcoming a child would be tantamount to welcoming Jesus as well as *“the one who sent me”* goes against everything they have been taught about the meaning of greatness and their relationship with lowly children.

But it is not by accident that Jesus chooses a child as an example of true greatness for his followers. The Greek word for “child” is the same word used in for the Suffering Servant in the Greek translation of the Old Testament: *“For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.”* (Isaiah 53:2). In Jesus’ embrace of the child is his self-identification as lowliest, least, and servant of all. Symbolically, “child” applies to anyone who needs help. Being a Christ, a true disciple of our Lord who defines true greatness as humble service, means *“to think of every human being, even the oddest, most villainous, or miserable as one to whom Jesus Christ is Brother and God is Father; and we have to deal with him on this assumption.”* (Karl Barth).

- “Greatness in the kingdom overturns the usual perceptions of greatness and honour. The challenge to learn to think as God does runs counter to well-

established behavior patterns. We often pay lip service to the view that the ‘first shall be last’ so long as we are not challenged to put that view to the test of accepting someone whom we consider a real ‘outsider.’” – PHEME PERKINS.

Our baptismal font features that words of Jesus (in both English and German) in which he commands his followers to “*let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.*” (10:14). We believe that Holy Baptism is a sacrament, a means of grace freely bestowed upon us in which those who are born “*children of a fallen humanity*” are “*reborn children of God and made members of the church which is the body of Christ.*” (ELW Holy Baptism). This blessing that is bestowed on us is a precious gift that God entrusts into our care; the Church into which these children are baptized is commissioned to welcome them, nurture them, teach them by word and example what it means to be a faithful follower of our Lord and Saviour “*so that your children may learn to trust God, proclaim Christ through word and deed, care for others and the world God made, and work for justice and peace.*” We are given the responsibility to be good role models for our children, so that they might see by our example what it means to live as a child of God, what it means to “*serve all people, following the example of Jesus,*” that true greatness does mean engaging in childish battles to become “king of the hill” but to serve others so that they might know the love of God who “*so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but shall have eternal life.*” (John 3:16). We are called to model lives of humble service so that our children may grow to understand that the call of Christ in every generation is to “*love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*” (John 13:34-35).

- “Why does he not embrace some mighty man, or a king, or some great saint? Instead, he takes a little child, who has but little understanding, and embraces it. Thus he shows that his kingdom belongs to children, that he, the Lord, is a prince of children, and that he wills to be found among children. By this he means to say, ‘If you want to know who is the greatest, I will tell you; if you listen to me, you are great, for I am all in all, and whoever receives me receives the Father, the maker of heaven and earth; yes, he receives heaven and earth at the same time. He receives God, with all his heavenly gifts and glory.’” – Martin Luther.

A role model in finding true greatness in humble service is Henri Nouwen, who left a teaching position at Harvard Divinity School to tend to the needs of a person with

severe disabilities in the L'Arche community in Richmond Hill. Despite his popularity at Harvard, Nouwen found it a very ambitious, competitive environment where many were focused on becoming the "king of the hill": *"I found myself praying poorly, living somewhat isolated from other people, and very much preoccupied with burning issues ... I woke up one day with the realization that I was living in a very dark place and that the term 'burnout' was a convenient psychological translation for spiritual death."* In leaving an environment where greatness was defined by one's academic achievements for one in which true greatness was found in serving others, Nouwen discovered what he described as a "spiritual rebirth" in a life of prayer that leads to serving others in Jesus' name.

- "If prayer leads us into a deeper unity with the compassionate Christ, it will always give rise to concrete acts of service. And if concrete acts of service do indeed lead us to a deeper solidarity with the poor, the hungry, the sick, the dying, and the oppressed, they will always give rise to prayer. In prayer we meet Christ, and in him all human suffering. In service we meet people, and in them the suffering Christ."

We may have had fun playing "King of the Hill" as children, but the childish nature of the game can be seen by what was accomplished: the winner was nothing more than the "king/queen" of a pile of dirt. True greatness comes not in seeking to get to the "top of the heap," in having status or power in the eyes of others. True greatness comes in knowing that we are children of God, heirs of God's promises, entrusted with the mission to share the good news of Jesus Christ and serve all people in the name of the one who came not to be served but to serve. True greatness comes in knowing that we are disciples of Christ, and that we are given the great privilege of embodying Christ's love by taking his place as servant of all, so that all may know that they too are beloved children of God.

Amen.