

Sermon for October 21, 2018 – “The Greatest”

Text: Mark 9:30-37

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We’ve been focusing on Mark’s gospel for about a month now and it seems that the deeper we get the more frustrating the disciples become. Today, they come off looking rather petty, like kids in the school yard at recess fighting over who’s the king of the playground castle. Of course, we know that this isn’t just a playground debate.

For people of faith the scene between Jesus and the disciples today is, indeed, about deeper things than self-promotion and we **know** it. We also know that this uncomfortable exchange between the disciples and Jesus has something to say about **us** too. It speaks to us about what it means for us to follow Jesus. The debate over who is the greatest is the memorable moment of the story today. But something that’s repeated from a previous passage, one that we read back on September 30 also from Mark’s gospel chapter 8, verses 27-38 to be exact, is what sets everything off. That “something” is Jesus talking about death. Specifically, **His** death. Now, in that previous reading in a scene very much like the one in today’s reading Jesus is walking with the disciples. Seemingly out of the blue He asks them who people say He is. After hearing their responses, He asks them, “Who do you say I am?” Peter, you’ll recall, answered, “You’re the Messiah.” Then, as now, Jesus warned them not to tell anyone. He then began to teach them what that declaration really means. That it means, among other things, that the Son of Man must suffer, be killed, and in three days rise again. Peter couldn’t abide it and took Jesus aside to rebuke Him. This angered Jesus who then called Peter ‘Satan.’

So, in today’s reading Jesus is talking about dying again. Once again, the disciples don’t understand and are afraid to ask. This point, the disciples almost complete lack of understanding, is important to keep in mind during the rest of the story. It’s important because this lack of understanding, all the talk about suffering, dying and rising, is what leads the disciples to focus on something trivial and manageable. They ignore the harder questions in favor of the trivial ones. They start arguing over who’s the greatest. My sense is that the reason why is because it’s an argument about something they feel can control. Something they believe to be quantifiable. Something to which they think they can contribute. All of this to distract from the fact that they didn’t understand what Jesus was talking about and are afraid to ask Him about it. And why were they afraid? Well, probably because they remember what happened when Peter spoke up. The question of who is the greatest among them is an idea they can manage, unlike the notion that Jesus has come into this world to be betrayed, suffer, and die only to rise again in three days. The trivial matter is easier to talk about when the big issue, the big question, makes them feel scared, powerless and insignificant. And so, they argue. They debate. They make passionate cases for who among them is the greatest and probably they feel like they’re achieving something, convinced as each of them no doubt was about their status, as they travelled down the road to Capernaum. That is, until Jesus hears them and sits them down for a talking to. The original “come to Jesus” meeting!

The disciples are doing something that we're pretty familiar with as human beings, especially as church folk. We know how to focus on the small trivial matters in order to avoid the big questions and bigger issues. In that way we're not all that different than the disciples which is probably why Mark tells the story in the first place! Anyone that's ever served on Session or on a committee can probably relate to what I'm saying. Many of us have been to meetings where the minute details of fixing a leaky sink or budget issues, staff reviews, how we'll serve communion, or what to serve for lunch at the annual meeting take up the bulk of time and energy. Been there – done that...right? Not all that much fun is it? No, of course not! Now, I'm not trivializing any of that... they're all important, sometimes vitally so. But that we spend so **much** time on the minutiae while the bigger, infinitely more important questions go unanswered is something that should give us pause.

What kind of questions am I talking about? Well, questions like...What does discipleship mean? Why is it important? How can we help make stewardship a way of life and not just a Sunday or a season? What is God calling us to do as a church? How do we discern that? But this isn't just a church thing, it extends to our personal lives as well. We should be asking ourselves What is God calling me to do? How can God use me? What does faithfulness mean as we grow older? Why is it that most (if not all) these questions go without so much as a brief mention? We naturally grab onto the small things, don't we? We gravitate to the things that feel manageable, quantifiable, the things we can debate, the things we feel more comfortable debating and discussing. And we do so, because the bigger questions of faith and life make us a little nervous, a little uncomfortable, don't they? Why is that? Is it that we believe we won't be able to come up with answers? Or is it that we suspect that the answers we find might not be what we want to hear?

In many people's eyes, religion is simply meant to be accepted. I get that – that's why it's called faith. But, I strongly believe that being able to reflect critically upon oneself and one's relationship to others, the world, and God is a key component of spiritual maturity. Think of it this way, most of us adopt the faith of their parents and/or church they were raised in. You went to Sunday school, you learned the important Bible stories, memorized key verses. But, how many of us at any time were encouraged to think **critically** about our faith? How often were we given ample opportunity to ask the deeper questions? It's been said that "a faith that has not been tested cannot be trusted." I believe that statement to be unqualifiedly true. I've personally witnessed many an untested, unquestioned faith fold like a cheap suit when tragedy, pain, grief etc., strikes, and make no mistake – they will. So, I say ask the darn questions! Don't be shy. No one's alone in their lack of knowing or understanding. Folks, even I have questions! And I know people a lot smarter than me who have questions. I think that's why I went to seminary in the first place to learn how to be a better pastor, sure, but also as I look back, to find answers to questions that'd been nagging me most of my life. My first class on my first day I was terrified that everyone there knew more than me! I felt a lot better when one of my classmates asked whether the Acts of the Apostles was in the Old Testament or New Testament. And I'll say this, finding answers to some of the weightier questions of faith helped in my learning a lot more about myself.

So, why **not** ask the questions? I think we'll be better Christians, better people, for it. I'm tempted to say more but that's a sermon for another day as is one about servant leadership. In the meantime let's not end up like the disciples arguing about who's the greatest, who has the best ideas about what needs to be done, and how best to go about it. Ultimately none of these things matter, not in the Kingdom of God because as the sacrament of Baptism reminds us we're all God's beloved children embraced by God and made a part of the family of God. Does it get any greater than that? I think not!

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.