

Mark 9

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "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." But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him.

And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he 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. And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me."

Among the memories of the Apostles that we find preserved & arranged in the Church's Gospels, one stands out that certainly does not bring honor to the disciples themselves: the day our Lord overheard some of them discussing who among them was greatest. Now, as if this alone did not make the disciples look vain and unspiritual, Mark also places this unholy debate right on the heels of the second announcement by Christ that he was destined by God's will to be executed at the hands of his enemies. Mark makes sure we notice the glaring contrast: The disciples holding forth to rank themselves in order of importance, versus Jesus looking ahead to the ropes and thorns, the nails and spearhead.

But God knows this is the only kind of church he is going to get so long as she is composed of sinners – a church among whose members there yet thrives that thirst to be admired, that hunger to be held in honor, that need to be thought great. Today's Gospel offers an apostolic snapshot of a war raging in each of us, and consequently among us – the struggle that St. Paul encapsulates in his statement to the Galatians:

The desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh.

In Mark 9, Jesus speaks of a hard and sorrowful path because he follows the direction of the Spirit. But the disciples hardly hear him because their thoughts are being ruled by their sinful flesh, that is, by their own self-centered human nature.

Now, in social terms we may speak of some people as greater than others. Of two who take piano lessons, one rises to perform in concert halls; another never rises above playing beer-songs at a family gathering. Greatness varies also in terms of authority: Some attain to an illustrious career as an admiral or general; another serves only briefly in the lowest ranks. In degree of beauty & physical form, in education or level of eloquence,

God does not make us all alike.

The disciples are not wrong, therefore, to see significance in the fact (for example) that out of the many Christ chose Twelve. It is no sin to own what God has given you, no sin in seeking to achieve what you can with that gift. Just as a manager does let this player bat cleanup, but a conductor does have this violinist sit in the first chair, so in the Body of Christ some will be called to tasks and positions that will – in this sense – make them great. We can look back with perfect justification and discuss, for example, “Who were the greatest Christian figures of the ninth century?”

What does constitute the error in the disciples’ hearts? It is not claiming to possess great gifts or hoping to achieve great things. Neither is it sinful merely to aspire to high office. What makes the disciples’ heated discussion wrong is their failure to understand this: When God raises a person up above his or her peers, it is for that individual to bring God glory, and to bless and enrich the lives of others. And often the higher the position, the greater the sacrifice.

One passage in Philippians 2 is well-known by many Christians, often because it is read on Palm Sunday. In it Paul describes how Christ Jesus...

...though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking 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.

What most Christians familiar with this text don’t realize is that the Apostle writes these lines to support the following exhortation that he has just made to all church members:

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Whatever gifts or position God has given us, each of us should pour ourselves out, not to win honor for ourselves or to benefit ourselves, but to bring honor to God and to benefit those around us.

In today’s account Jesus drives this point home by taking a young bystander and planting him right in the center of the discussion group. Then he says:

“Whoever receives one such child in my name...”

The word in the text that is translated here as “receive” has a specific meaning: It refers to how one person extends a welcome to another and offers that person hospitality. Christ is quite aware of how in Jewish society people would often measure out their welcome according to the status of who it was they were inviting: “What advantage might it bring me to be generous, even extravagant, in offering my dining room to this person or that?”

But a young child owns nothing, can offer no social or political favor in return. There will simply be no advantage for you at all, if you decide to show kindness and generosity – if you “receive” – a person too young

to own anything . You will only do it if you truly care about that child and wish to do them good.

As our Lord and Savior, Christ knew that all we could offer him was our sin and our death. But because God is love, he was willing to offer the one thing that only he could provide: himself as victim in the brutal horror of an unjust crucifixion. And there came a time when he began intimating to his followers for some time: *the Son of Man is about to be betrayed and killed*. Nothing they had seen so far could compare to his final self-offering – the greatest thing that one human being ever did for mankind.

My brothers and sisters in Christ , you would not go amiss were you to project the truth of today's Gospel upon what you presently face, and whatever you shall be facing and deciding, as Immanuel congregation. As many of you well know, church meetings can easily become arenas for the unbridled exercise of someone's natural passions. But they can also, by God's grace and the light of this morning's Scripture, prove opportunities in which you make the effort to walk and talk under the guidance of the Spirit, each of you focused not on yourself but on God's will and other people's benefit.

If God is merciful and things go right, whoever the next pastor called to serve Immanuel may turn out to be, that man may well conduct your funeral. Or if you are young, he may still be serving here well after you have moved to another state. The optimum number of congregations for our Synod to have in Wichita is, in one sense, neither here nor there. I do not mean that it is irrelevant, but I do mean this: When it comes to earthly matters in the churches of God – that is, matters not directly having to do with the truth of the Gospel – which decision Christians make matters far less than how they behave in the process. What matters more than if you voted "A" or "B" is this question: Which example in Mark 9 did my thinking and my behavior most resemble: that of the self-occupied disciples, or that of the self-offering Lord?"

When we gather for the Divine Service each Sunday, we don't do so because we believe that Sunday is the required day for Christians to keep the Old Testament Sabbath-law. Instead, we believe & affirm how the ancient Church, under the guidance of the Spirit, chose this day in celebration of Jesus' resurrection on the first day of the week. Liturgically, we state it this way: Every Sunday service is an observance of Easter.

This is why when you take your place in the pew, you don't have to choose what you're going to say. Much of the service requires simply that you listen and pay close attention. And when it is time for you to open your mouth, the liturgy & hymns fill it for you; they dictate what you shall say & sing. If the content is the right stuff, then every Sunday we will sing, recite, and hear about how in God's love for the world our Savior Jesus Christ came not to be served but to serve; not to fill up on what the world had to offer but to empty himself and give us what heaven has to offer.

May that which fills your mouths in the sanctuary fill your mind, so that when you gather in other rooms as God's people, each seeks to serve others and to glorify God.