

Mark 9:30-37

Who is the greatest ballplayer of all time? Some are saying Albert Pujols. The greatest golfer? Tiger Woods. Muhammad Ali says, "I am the greatest!" because he was good at hitting other boxers in the face. Who is the greatest Christian? If we were to vote on this, what would you look for in a person? The number of souls he or she brought to Christ? How much money they gave to the church? How hard they worked for the Lord?

The disciples actually did this. They voted on the greatest follower of Jesus, and each one voted for himself. They were arguing the entire time they were walking along the road to Capernaum—which one of them is the greatest—was their topic of conversation. Jesus was walking along the same road. Now He is the "Greatest" in every sense of the word. But His speech was not about glory and honor for Himself, but rather suffering and death. Talk about being insensitive! Here is Jesus telling His disciples that He will lay down His life for them, and all they can do is argue about greatness. When they arrived in Capernaum Jesus did some teaching. "Greatness," He was telling them, "is all about serving...about being the very last."

Now I don't think that definition would work too well with the world. The greatest ballplayer is the one who scores the fewest runs? The greatest team is the one that comes in last? The greatest boxer is the one who always turns his cheek after being struck in the face? The greatest military is the one that always loses? No, the world has a different model for greatness, but we understand it by looking at Jesus.

Here is the Lord of Glory who goes to Jerusalem even though He knows He will be betrayed into the hands of men. Jesus doesn't raise a hand to defend Himself even though they repeatedly strike Him in the face, whip His back, and beat Him with rods. Jesus does not call for legions of angels to come and help Him even though He is suffering on the cross to the point of death.

What makes Jesus great is not that He is all-powerful, but the fact that He did not use His power to prevent His crucifixion for you. What makes Jesus great is not that He is God, but that as God He serves you by laying down His life for you. This is the Gospel. It is the topic of conversation that is always on the lips of your Lord. His word to you is always what He has done for your salvation. It is the conversation of the saints and angels in heaven. It is what Moses and Elijah discussed with Christ on the Holy Mountain.

And what about us? When it comes to our lips, and mouths, and tongues, what is our topic of conversation? We're like the disciples on the road to Capernaum, aren't we? We like to speak about ourselves; about all that we do for God. We talk to others about our works of service. This is our favorite topic of conversation.

Now it's not wrong to serve the Lord. In fact, if someone has no desire to serve God, there is something wrong with him. The problem is that our service to God often gets in the way of His service to us. The disciples really didn't understand what Jesus was saying when He was telling them that He was going to Jerusalem to suffer and die. They didn't understand because they were too busy talking about what great servants they were.

That's our trouble as well. We get so involved in church work that we forget the reason why we're here—to listen to the words of our Lord. We become so caught up in our service to God that we have trouble taking the time to receive His gifts of service to us. What's more, like the disciples, we become proud of what we do...so proud that it becomes difficult to humbly bend the knee before Christ. We start getting the idea that Jesus serves us with His gifts, not purely out of grace and mercy, but because we work so hard to serve His church.

Remember the story of Mary and Martha? Martha was in the kitchen preparing a meal and Mary was sitting at the feet of Jesus listening to His words. Jesus did not condemn Martha for serving Him, but He did tell her that Mary had chosen "the best part." The greatest Christian is not the one who serves His Lord the best, but the one who lets Jesus serve him. Greatness does not have to do with what we do for God. It has to do with what God does for us.

Your presence here in God's House today is greater, by far, than all the work you will do tomorrow at the church dinner—because today Jesus serves you; tomorrow you serve Him. Today you are a Mary. Tomorrow you become a Martha. It's not wrong to be a Martha, unless it prevents us from becoming a Mary.

In His teaching about greatness, Jesus used an object lesson. He stood a child in the midst of His disciples. "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in My name," He said, "welcomes Me." We haven't seen much of that lately, have we? Rather, we have seen children murdered in cold blood. School shootings...children ripped from their mothers... explicit e-mails sent to children. The world not only misunderstands what greatness is, it is also not a very "welcoming" place for children.

But the church is different from the world. We don't just welcome children; we welcome them "in Jesus' Name." We bring them to Holy Baptism where God gives them every heavenly gift in Christ Jesus. We teach them of Jesus and His love for them. We set a Christian example for them so they learn what it means to be a follower of Christ.

And what's so great about that? Just this—little children don't have the means to pay us back. Children are not able to repay us for welcoming them in Jesus' name. And that is just as true with regard to God and us. You and I are God's children. Even if we have lived 90-plus years on this earth, every baptized soul is a child of God. And children do not have the means to pay back for what is given to them. When God serves you with His gifts He does not expect you to repay Him, no more than you and I would expect an infant to repay us for giving him a Christian baptism. And just as children cannot repay us, neither can we repay God.

God doesn't forgive you so that you owe Him one. He forgives you...period! Will you forgive others because you are forgiven? Absolutely! But that's not why God forgives you. Your Heavenly Father forgives you because He is merciful, and because Jesus suffered and died for you. God doesn't promise you eternal life so that we live obedient lives. He gives you life in Jesus Christ, not because of how you have lived, or because of how you will live. You have eternal life in your Savior because God is purely gracious to you. The gifts He gave you in your baptism do not place you in His debt. Jesus paid your debt on the cross.

Why do we take care of our children? Because of what they give us and do for us? No! Because they are our children. And that's why God cares for you. Not because you serve Him, but because you are His child in Christ Jesus. God doesn't love you because you love Him. God doesn't forgive you because you forgive others. It is for Jesus' sake—by His name, that God loves and forgives you. And you are forgiven. Even though we prefer to be Martha over Mary; even though we prefer to speak about our works and not Jesus' works for us. God forgives you. And He gives you His promise of eternal life—and that's what is so great about God. He does all this for you because, in Christ Jesus, He has made you His child. Amen.