

Pentecost 18B

October 4, 2009

Hymns: 566 - 523 - 486 - 623 v4

MARK 9:30-37

GREATNESS IS IN SERVICE!

***Our Human Nature Doesn't See It That Way.**

***Christ Is Our Model For Service.**

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ. Amen.

Dear Servants of Christ....AND of your fellow man,

The politician was sitting at his campaign headquarters when the phone rang. He listened intently, and after a moment his face brightened. When he hung up, he immediately phoned his mother to tell her the good news. "Mom," he shouted, "the results are in. I won the election!" "Honestly?" she asked. The politician's smile faded. "Aw, Mom, why bring that up at a time like this?"

We all like to win, don't we? We all want to be part of the crowd chanting, "We're number one! We're number one." "Winning isn't everything," said legendary coach Vince Lombardi, "it's the only thing." Lombardi complained he was misquoted, but there are people who believe that winning is the only thing that matters.

There are many people today who would divide the world into two groups, the winners and the losers. And it doesn't matter how many people you have to step on, the only thing that matters is to win. President Lyndon Baines Johnson was a man who loved to win. He was a master of the politics of power. Anything we might have heard about Johnson's will to win is probably an understatement. Lyndon Johnson said his father would come into his room at five o'clock every morning, tweak his toes, and shout, "Get up, Lyndon. Every other boy in town has a head start on you." That explains a lot about Lyndon Johnson.

(slide 1) Jesus and His disciples were coming to the town of Capernaum. As they entered the house where they would be staying, He asked His disciples, "What were you arguing about on the road?" But they kept quiet, says Mark in his Gospel, because on the way they had argued about who was number one among them. So, the disciples were human just like you and I are human. Who doesn't want to stand out? Some of the greatest people who have ever lived were also among the most ambitious. The disciples wanted their names to be in lights just as you and I want to stand out from our peers. There is nothing wrong with that as long it does not cause us to mistreat others or betray Christian values. My guess is Jesus wanted them to be ambitious because ambitious people get things done. He just wanted them to be ambitious in the right way.

(slide 2) Sitting down, Jesus called the twelve disciples together and said to them, "***If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.***" Think about those words for a moment. If you want to be the greatest, you must learn to serve others. What does it mean to be a servant? Service is not an ambition that most of us aspire to. We would prefer to look after number one rather than being a servant.

At the Princeton Theological Seminary years ago, twenty theological students - future ministers of the Gospel! - were instructed to go to a recording studio and make a tape recording of their interpretation of the story of the Good Samaritan. Twenty theological students in a second group were told to go to the same recording studio. However they were simply told that they were participating in a career study program. They were to give a talk on their future career and their idea of ministry. Unknown to the students, a professional actor had been hired to stage an act for them as they each walked along the route at different times from the dormitory to the recording studio for their individual appointment. As the students passed by this actor, he clutched his chest, gasped, and fell to the ground. Amazingly, sixty percent of these theological students did not stop. They trudged right on to keep their appointments with the tape recorder.

An article reporting on this study published in the magazine *Human Behavior*, carried this notation: "Some who were planning their dissertation on the Good Samaritan literally stepped over the slumped body as they

hurried along, like the priest and levite in Jesus' parable." Imagine that! Giving a dissertation on the Good Samaritan and stepping over the prone body of an unfortunate person. Not much of a servant mentality there.

A comedian said he was once mugged. He was beaten up, his face blackened and bruised. Someone asked him, "Why didn't you fight back?" His answer was, "I started to but I decided not to get involved." Non-involvement is the curse of our time. And, of course, we have many ways of rationalizing our lack of involvement: We don't pick up hitchhikers, they may knock us on the head; we don't stop to help someone with a medical emergency because we might get sued; we don't want to give the homeless man any money because he is going to spend it on alcohol anyway. We don't want to support people on welfare because they shouldn't have had all those babies in the first place.

Now to be sure, there is more than a grain of truth to these rationalizations, but the hard truth of our lives is that we would much rather be served than to serve--to receive rather than to give. Now that is not always true, and how thrilled we are when we hear of someone giving of himself or herself for another. **(slide 3)** Years back a plane crashed on a runway in Philadelphia and caught on fire. At the door an attractive twenty-four-year-old flight attendant, Mary Housley, took her place to help the passengers to the ground. As soon as she had finished getting all of the passengers to safety Housley also started to jump from the plane. But just before she made her escape, a passenger on the ground screamed, "My baby, my baby!" Somehow this passenger had left her baby behind on the plane. Flight attendant Mary Housley turned back into the plane to find the baby, and that was the last time anyone saw her alive. When the debris cooled they found Mary Housley's body over the 4-month-old baby she tried to rescue. TIME magazine captioned her picture with these words, "She could have jumped."

There are still heroes in the world. There are still people who sacrifice themselves for others and we are thankful for it. But all too often, I'm sorry to say, you and I have forgotten what Christ meant when He said that we are to be a servant of all. Service is actually the key to becoming the greatest. We can easily see this in business, can't we? We spend our hard earned money with companies that give us the best service. We may choose a fast food restaurant not because of the quality of its food, but because of the cleanliness of its restrooms. We may choose a supermarket not because it always has the lowest prices, but because the personnel are always so friendly and the grocery baggers helpful. Commercial enterprises often succeed or fail based on their service. Companies that give us poor service earn our scorn.

Most people in business do not have to be hit over the head to see the importance of good service. Service is the key to success in business. We can see that in our community. **(slide 4)** Now Parish Assistance tells us it is also true of churches. Those churches which genuinely serve their communities attract church home seekers. If we are going to have a prosperous church, we are going to have to serve our community. The one great way we are already doing that is in our ministry to children through our preschool.

There is a very important story about a prosperous farmer who invited an old school friend to spend a weekend on his farm. They walked all over the place looking at the lush crops about to be harvested and the herds of sleek cattle, and especially at the great flocks of sheep. The friend had seen sheep from this flock exhibited at state and county fairs. They seemed to win all the prizes. He said to his farmer friend, "I've never seen finer sheep. How do you do it?" The farmer answered, "They are fine sheep because I take care of my lambs." That's a striking statement. The farmer took care of the lambs; therefore he had prize-winning sheep.

(slide 5) What happens if a church does not take care of its lambs? What if our parents don't take care to make Christ the center of their home in devotion, prayer, and disciple life style? What if they fail to raise their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord at home as well as through church participation? At church we should never have any problem finding people to work with our boys and girls, with our young people. Miss Koch puts out appeals from time to time for needed help and ways members could enrich the preschool experience for our children. We should never have any trouble finding people to work with any part of the church's ministry--with visiting shut-ins, with council, committees, ushers, and guild work, with a potential Lutheran Pioneer program. We are a servant people, and if we are to be a prosperous church, we must discover people's perceived needs and meet those needs. We know each soul has a spiritual need that must be met.

More and more as America becomes a secular society, we have to meet other needs first – maybe do what is called friendship evangelism - to get a chance to share Christ with them.

Isn't it interesting that when Jesus said that we must be servant of all, He took a child and set him in the midst of them? And when He had taken him in His arms, He said unto them, ***“Whoever welcomes one of these little children in My name welcomes Me; and whoever welcomes Me does not welcome Me but the One Who sent Me.”*** Serving little children is often a humbling experience. If we are going to be a successful church, we must be a church that serves boys and girls and young people and aging persons, and the entire church family, as well as the community outside. Service is the key to greatness.

Now that is true of our individual lives as well. As somebody once put it, “Live such a life that when it comes your time to die, even the undertaker is sad.” If we would be the greatest person in our community, we have got to be a person who is willing to serve the neighborhood, perform our civic duties, and serve the church.(slide 6) That is the key to greatness, because serving is what God's people are all about. That's who we are. Jesus Christ, says Paul in Philippians, ***“being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant....He humbled Himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!”(Philippians 2:6-8)***. There was Jesus washing the feet of His disciples. There was Jesus carrying His cross up Golgotha. There was Jesus saying to His beloved disciple Peter after His resurrection, “Feed My sheep. Feed My lambs.”(John 21) That's who we are.

The kind of radical service commitment that led all of the apostles, save one, to martyrdom, might be too much for us. But we dare not forget where we came from and who we are. We are the Company of the Committed; we are the Servant Community; we are the Body of Jesus Christ Who gave Himself as a ransom for our sins. It is so easy for us in this fine church, with these beautiful facilities, to forget that the church of Jesus Christ would not even exist today if there were not people who had been willing to give their all, even as our Master gave His all in our behalf. Want to be number one? The word is service! Repent of pride and seeking the glory of being served. See your Lord serving you all the way to the cross. And then, serve! Serve your family, serve your community, serve in Christ's Church. Amen.

May He Who began a good work in you carry it on to completion until the day of Jesus Christ. Amen.