

Sermon on Mark 9:30 – 37 – Who Wants To Be First? *When he was in the house, he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the road?” But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, “If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.”*

Who wants to be first? Depends on what you might be first for. First in line for recess or lunch. First in line for tickets to the big game or concert! Count me in! First in line for a shot or a trip to the dentist? Count me out! First in line for donuts at church? Awesome! First in line for volunteering at church? Right now I really don't have the time ... besides there are probably lots of other people who could do a better job than me ... I think I'll have to pass!

Who wants to be first? First in line for fame and recognition? In our text for today that line began and ended with the disciples. First in line for pain and suffering? That line began and ended with Jesus. Our text for today takes place not long after Jesus' Transfiguration. His ministry here on earth was drawing to a close and the cross loomed off in the distance. The One who once had crowds surrounding him now tried to avoid those crowds so that he could spend more time with his disciples. It's obvious that the work of the Teacher was far from over.

“Jesus I will ponder now on your holy passion.” If only that would have been the case for those disciples. Instead they chose to argue about who was the greatest! They probably thought that Jesus wasn't listening, but he heard every word. “*What were you arguing about on the road?*” he asked. Like little children caught red-handed, they hung their heads in shame and remained silent. Why were they arguing about who was the greatest? Maybe it was because Jesus only took Peter, James, and John up the Mountain of Transfiguration? Maybe it was because Jesus had just finished telling Peter that he would build his church on the rock of Peter's confession? But don't blame Jesus. Blame sinful pride and sinful hearts. That's what was at the heart of their argument. Truth be told, that's what's at the heart of many of our arguments as well. “It's all about me, getting my way, getting what I want.”

And to think all this came after Jesus had just finished telling them, “*The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.*” Were they listening? Look how they responded! They spent the rest of the trip pushing and shoving like little

children to be first in line. It's been said we never really lose our sinful childishness, we just think we have more mature ways of hiding it. We probably don't push and shove people around physically speaking, but how often haven't we pushed and shoved people around with unkind words? How often haven't we pushed our way to the front of the line to hear the latest gossip and rumors? How often haven't we pushed our way to the front of the line to get our kids involved in things we feel would be beneficial to their academic or athletic careers but pushed off things like Sunday School or family devotions because there just doesn't seem to be enough time for it all? How often haven't we completely avoided the line to lend a helping hand when needed? How often haven't we completely avoided the line to speak well of others and take their words and actions in the kindest possible way?

Who wants to be first? There's only one who truly deserves to be first in our lives and that's God! He tells us to fear, love, and trust in him above all things. He tells us to love our neighbor as ourselves. It's tempting to want to be great, but if we do so at the expense of making others out to be the least, we become the least in the eyes of God. Those disciples knew better. So do we. When Jesus called them on it, they felt guilty and ashamed. Ashamed of some of the things you've said and done? Don't try to hide them. Your Heavenly Father already knows about them. Like a child trying to cover up his or her disobedience, when the truth is exposed the punishment is far worse. The Apostle John writes, “*if we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*” Come clean with God and you'll receive the assurance that you are clean in the eyes of God because Jesus has washed all of your sins away.

One of the many things I learned to better understand in my recent trip to Israel was the plight of the Children of Israel as they wandered in the wilderness. In my mind I had kind of pictured it like forty years of camping at a local state park. Not really enjoyable but probably doable. Don't picture trees and lakes and green grass all around. Picture camping out in the American Southwest or Desert Valley year round for forty years. Our short walks through this kind of terrain was draining. And we were able to look forward to an air-conditioned bus, air conditioned hotels and bountiful buffets at the beginning and end of our days. For the Children of Israel, there were no air conditioned buses or hotels or bountiful buffets. Although

sin is never excusable, it becomes more understandable. Regretfully, I know I would have been there grumbling and complaining through it all.

Jesus and his disciples had long days. Long days with busy schedules that can often leave people grumpy and irritable where patience wears thin. But not Jesus. You don't see his patience wearing thin. You see him taking a little child into his arms saying, *"I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me."* Dear friends in Christ, be like little children. Not pushing and shoving your way to the front of the line to be the greatest, but having a simple child-like faith that trusts Jesus, that sees your place in line behind Jesus. Part of that child-like faith involves realizing the importance of nurturing the faith of little children. When Jesus says, *"in my name,"* he's emphasizing the need to take care of their greatest need in life, the One Thing Needful, namely God and His Word. He tells us to tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord.

Tired, but not too tired to take the little children into his arms and bless them. Exhausted, but not too exhausted to help and heal, to preach and teach, to serve those around him. Dusty roads led to dirty feet. On the night before his death, the disciples noticed that there wasn't anyone around to wash them. They probably argued about that too because that was normally reserved for the lowest of servants. Something that wouldn't be found in them at the time. Something that shouldn't have been found in Jesus ever. But being a leader involves being a servant. As the old saying goes, "you shouldn't expect others to do what you yourself are unwilling to do." When no one else volunteered, Jesus did. Pouring water into a basin, he washed his disciples feet, drying them with a towel wrapped around his waist. And to think he had already volunteered to carry our sins and the sins of the world on his shoulders. He had already volunteered to suffer the punishment of hell so that we would never have to. He made himself nothing, becoming the very last, the servant of all because he *"did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many."* He suffered and died to forgive our sins. The times we tried to be great and made others out to be the least. The times we were so focused on getting our way that we went out of our way to make sure others didn't get theirs. These and all of our sins were poured into the cup Jesus would drink. Crucified with the dregs of society, he drank the bitter dregs of our sins to the last drop. It was a job nobody else wanted to do. It was a job nobody else could do. But Jesus did it perfectly, and through it, his perfection was

transferred to us and our sins were washed away. Instead of standing in the line to hell that we deserve, Jesus placed us in the line to heaven, his gift to us through his death and resurrection.

The disciples didn't understand it at the time, but after Jesus died and rose again, they would. They too would carry the cross of Jesus. They would live and die for him. They saw what needed to be done and they did it because they knew they weren't working for men, they were working for the Lord. The Teacher had finally gotten through to them. Has he gotten through to you? That greatness in the kingdom of God involves being the last and the least. That greatness in the kingdom of God doesn't always involve doing the kind of work that's wanted but often involves doing the work that isn't wanted but definitely needed. That greatness in the kingdom of God doesn't always involve doing work that will be noticed or appreciated but even doing work that isn't noticed or appreciated. Take comfort in the truth that what isn't noticed or appreciated by others is noticed and appreciated by Jesus who says, *"well done good and faithful servant."* May God grant us the grace to realize that, it's not about me, it's all about Jesus. That's the theme of our Every Member Visits that we plan to conduct in the months to come. We hope you'll look forward to them as we look forward to sharing God's Word with you!

One commentator writes, "To be first means to be last, to be a servant. No service is too lowly. Service means sacrificing your time, your talents, your treasures, yourself for the sake of others, even when they do not realize or appreciate it. Yes, even helping a child in Jesus' name spiritually, physically, or emotionally is great in the kingdom of God. When you do so in Jesus' name, that is, because you love Jesus, then you not only welcome Jesus into your heart and life but also the Father who sent him."

Jesus would often use little children to teach his disciples a lesson. How often hasn't he done the same for us? The disciples were probably expecting a harsh rebuke from Jesus that day. Once again he would give something they didn't deserve. A vivid object lesson of His love that they were to take and share with others. A reminder that to be the greatest, you have to be the least. To be the first, you have to be the last. To be a leader, you have to be a servant. Paradoxes in the eyes of the world, but not in the eyes of God. So, who wants to be first? May God lead each and every one of us to want to be first in line for service in his kingdom!

Amen.