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St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church
18th Sunday after Pentecost/Proper 20/Year B
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Mark 9: 30-37

Today's Gospel has a familiar ring to it as once again we find Jesus and his disciples traveling alone. Just last week Peter proclaimed what Jesus already knew about himself, that Jesus was the Messiah. But then Jesus had to explain to them that he was not the kind of messiah that people had come to expect. He had a different idea of what his messiahship meant and it had nothing to do with leading an insurrection or even living the glorious life of a ruler. Jesus told them that he would soon be handed over, die, yet rise on the third day. And if that were not enough to shock their systems, Jesus told Peter and the others that if anyone wanted to follow him (and that includes us) that we need to be willing to lay down our lives for the sake of the kingdom.

In our gospel passage for today, Jesus and his disciples are passing through Galilee and as they walk Jesus is still teaching. For a second time he tells them that he will be betrayed, killed, and be raised on the third day. Still, the disciples don't seem to get it. Were they that clueless? What part about betrayal and dying did they not understand? And the thing about rising again? That in itself, it seems, would beg more questions and still more answers. But they were afraid to ask Jesus a single question. Still, they did find other things to talk about along the way.

Once they came into the town of Capernaum and entered a house Jesus asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" Apparently they had been bickering and Jesus knew it. Oh, to have been a fly on the wall! Had they been boasting about which one of them spent the most time with Jesus? Or who performed the most miracles that time he sent them out two by two? Had they been discussing how they 'ranked' or who among them was actually in Jesus' inner circle, Jesus' closest buds? After all, before they all set out for Capernaum, Jesus had taken Peter, James, and John alone with him up a mountaintop where he was transformed before their eyes. These three had seen him in all his glory. But Mark tells us that they fell silent. They were hesitant to answer him. After deafening silence

they finally confessed that they had been fighting over which one was the greatest among them.

We shouldn't be surprised by their answer. We've probably had same kind of arguments. Some of us who have siblings may had conversations similar to those of the Smothers' Brothers, Dick and Tom. Remember how Tom used to interject, "Mom always liked you best!" Yeah! Been there. Done that. From sibling rivalries to our favorite sports teams to the best cars to the best scotch to the best cities to live; we all want know, 'Who or what is the greatest?' We have been conditioned to seek the best and to be the best. To be better off than "them." We watch the news, search the internet, and look at advertisements, and we see who the world and society, holds up. The "greatest" are those who have the most money and the most toys. They are usually the most educated, influential, powerful, and the most glamorous according to the standards of the dominant culture. In and of themselves there is generally nothing wrong with being any of these things until the other (another person) is put down, held in a certain place, or excluded.

Well, Jesus being Jesus, quickly put things in perspective. Jesus turned the notion of being the greatest on its head by saying, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Greatness is not about power or prestige or rank but greatness is about service. If you want to be first-take the last place. Be the servant.

Mark tells us that Jesus then took a little child, placed the child in their midst, and then took the child into his arms. Brothers and sisters, Jesus was not posing for a photo op here. Oh no. This was not a Kodak moment but a teaching moment. For you see, in Jesus' day a little one, a child, was considered the least and most vulnerable of society. Oh, parents and grandparents and extended family members may have "ooh'd and aah'd" and loved that tiny being but the truth was-a child in first century Palestine was considered to be at the bottom rung of society, the bottom of the chain and devalued. Children were insignificant until they were old enough to contribute to the family's income, do well for themselves, or were able to care for their aging parents. Children for the most part were invisible along with the elderly, sick, women, handicapped, unclean, shepherds, homeless, prisoners, slaves, and immigrants, and the like. Funny how some things change yet remain the same in some instances...

But here, Jesus puts a child in their midst to stand in for all those without power and status. To stand in for those who in the eyes of society, were vulnerable, dependent, and nobodies. He turns yet another notion of society's ideals upside down and inside out. Here he presents a reversal of status and values.

Lifting the child Jesus said to his disciples "Whoever welcomes one such a child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." In other words he is saying, 'Embrace them. Embrace and welcome, receive, a sister, a brother, a child. Embrace the least, the least likely, the unfortunate, the one society has labeled a 'nobody', because in doing so you embrace *me* and you embrace and welcome and receive *the One, my Father*, who sent me.'

Sisters and brothers, following Jesus always means striving as best we can to live out the Gospel. Living out our lives in a way contrary to some of the world's notions and teachings. That means bucking the trappings of power and prestige for our own self-interest. Finding our way out of the hell hole we continue to manifest by our violating and dehumanizing others, and our continued acts of hatred, discrimination, racial profiling, oppression, and injustice. Following Jesus means that we live not just for ourselves but for the world. We were not created to ignore the person next to us or to be in competition with each other. We were created *to be with* one another, to *embrace* one another, to *love* one another.

Jesus said that we are not to be so concerned about who among us is the greatest but we are to be of service. We are to feed the hungry. Cloth the naked. House the homeless. To visit the sick and imprisoned. To show concern for everyone especially those who need us most. Those who need us to see and hear their suffering and speak and write words even march on their behalf if need be, and to listen even when we don't have all the answers. We are to look into the eyes of our brother and sister and recognize their dignity and worth as fellow human beings. We are to accept those who are different from ourselves and look beyond stereotypes, race, class, status, gender, and our myriad of differences. And at the same time embrace those differences that are as beautiful as the colors in a rainbow. We are to be present to those who long to see and feel the tangible love of God in their lives and those wanting to experience kingdom living here and now as they breathe on this side of the grave. When we act as Christ-like followers for the least and the lowly, we are doing it for Him.

“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”

The Good News is that we are counted among the followers of Jesus Christ who can help shape a different and better world than the one we are living in now. Someone said of supposed followers of Jesus, “We are not in the business of becoming the greatest.” No, we are not. We are a part of the Jesus Movement helping to usher in the Kingdom of God right here on earth. The Kingdom of God where there is no ‘us and them’. No ‘greater than or less than’. Where ALL life, ALL LIFE, is precious and holy.

This is hard work. It was hard for the disciples to understand and it is just as hard for us to comprehend and to carry out what Jesus asks of all of us and that is to put others first rather than ourselves.

Jesus chose to be the servant of all. He showed us as much by keeping his eyes fixed on Jerusalem and the cross before him.

There is for all of us, a different kind of greatest and our Savior promises to show us the way. Thanks be to God! Amen!