

True Greatness Before God

St. Mark's Gospel 9:35

Trinity Lutheran – Kearney, Missouri

September 20, 2009 – Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost



In the name of the Father, and of the † Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. What is it about us human beings that causes us to look for opportunities to “one up” everybody else? Although it’s undeniable that we learn this so-called skill from others, the sad reality is that this is also a trait we’re born with. Notice how it first happens in infants – who are wont to throw a fit at the drop of a hat if mom and dad aren’t quick enough to get them something they think they need. When brothers or sisters come into the picture, parents struggle to continually remind their children that they have to learn to share with one another, that everything doesn’t belong to them, and that the universe doesn’t revolve around their needs and wants.

After they start talking, children soon demand these things from others. They complain when somebody gets something they wanted before they can get their hands on it. Children are harsh and cruel to those who aren’t as agile, coordinated, talented, or “good-looking” as everyone else. The time and energy parents expend making their children realize that sometimes they have to place the needs of others before their own needs is staggering. To be sure, it’s a challenge for each of us as we try to learn all these things and put them into practice in our own life. Yet the fact of the matter is that this lesson is so hard to learn that not a one of us – no matter how long we live, or how often we’re taught it – will ever fully learn it!

As I was going through the litany of all the difficulties attendant to the raising of children I noticed lots of you were nodding in agreement. We’ve all experienced some of these things, not only as we deal with them in our own children and in relationships with others – but also in our own life. But there’s something even worse – we teach these things to others. I dare say there isn’t an adult sitting here today who hasn’t had a conversation with a loved one who, when asked where they picked up a particular bad behavior or attitude, forthrightly replied: “I learned it from you!”

You see, no matter how well you might walk the walk, talk the talk, or play the game, the bot-

tom line is that *none of us likes to come in second place*. We all want to be “Number One” because we know that while honors, accolades and possibly great wealth will usually be given to those who invent a better mousetrap or come in first, those who come in second aren’t likely to get much more than a few “atta-boys” or a pat on the back. It’s precisely this phenomenon that our Lord and Savior addresses here in this morning’s Gospel when He says to His disciples – who’d been arguing as they walked along the road about which of them would be greatest in the Kingdom of heaven – that if anyone desires to be first, he must be last – and not only last, but servant to everyone else! Now if anyone understood Christ’s message, it certainly should have been the disciples. Yet it’s clear from this text that they hadn’t understood Him at all. Time after time it seems that the thing the disciples were most concerned about was which of them was going to come in first.

Consider the Ten Lepers who – having been healed of their leprosy – were sent to show themselves to the priests. “Should not ten have returned to give thanks?” Jesus queried. And yet, only one understood that Jesus was the Holy One of God to whom he now owed his thanksgiving. But Jesus didn’t complain because He hadn’t been given the glory. Our Lord knows full-well that there are plenty of demanding people in this world who, after having been served, will then demand even more – and that, without even so much as a simple “Thank-you!” And our Lord also knows that there are plenty of folks who’ll only see someone’s service to them as an opportunity to take further advantage of that person. When they see someone’s readiness to serve, they’ll seize it as an occasion to take even more. But should that stop us from giving to others?

Notice how our Lord never spoke even one bitter word toward the selfish, glory-seeking of His enemies. Rather, He served them even to the point of death. He loved them with His dying breath – even praying fervently in His last hour that they would come to believe in Him. Jesus would have

been well within His “rights” had He turned His back on us all, removed Himself from this fallen world, and left us to our own devices – but that would have resulted in eternal death for everyone – and God’s love wouldn’t allow that.

When you examine the life and teaching of Jesus, does it sometimes seem that all these things are recorded in Holy Scripture so you can see how our Lord lived His life – so you can ask the question: “What would Jesus do?” – then go out and do likewise? Well, if you believe that, you’ve missed the point entirely! Our Lord Jesus Christ came into this world to save sinners, not to show them how to live a better life. And although a more spiritually-productive life *will* be the result of knowing Jesus as Savior – trying to reverse the process – that is, trying to live a more Godly life in hopes of knowing God better – will gain you nothing! It won’t make you more Godly – and indeed, apart from Christ, even your best works will do nothing more than stand against you as a witness on the Last Day when our Savior comes to judge the living and the dead.

Christ hadn’t taught His disciples that if they thought humble thoughts, lived selfless lives, or sought only to serve others, that they’d receive the kind of status in heaven they’d been arguing about among themselves as they walked along the road. And the same is true for you and me. If you want to be first, says Jesus, you have to be last. But how do you accomplish *that*? It isn’t simply an act of the will, or a personal decision. Being last means recognizing that on your own you stand before God as one who has not been a faithful servant, who hasn’t understood nor obeyed all that our Lord has written, who’s fallen short of God’s glory, who is truly a poor miserable sinner deserving of nothing from God other than His wrath and hot indignation.

When Jesus told the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector His point was unmistakable. The Pharisee had come before God in thanksgiving because he “wasn’t like other men,” He didn’t consider himself to be a sinner. In contrast, the tax

collector stood off at a distance and prayed: “Be merciful to me – a sinner.” And what was Jesus’ conclusion? The tax collector was the one who went home justified before God, while the Pharisee went home feeling good about himself – even though he was lost and far from God.

Dear friends, that’s where the rubber needs to meet the road for you. In our current age it’s quite common to hear so-called “spiritual” people say that if you’re “really” a Christian then you’ll be doing this, that, or some other thing – or that you’ll be feeling this, that, or some other way – and conversely that you won’t be feeling some other way or doing some other thing that isn’t quite so “God-pleasing.” The intent of such a statement is that you’ll carefully examine your life to see whether or not you’re actually a Christian – and then go do something about it – which is impossible apart from God’s Word, His Sacraments, and the promises of the Gospel!

The truth is that it’s *only* when you look to the objective Word and promises of God that you can ever *really* begin to understand who you are – or know what God thinks of you. It’s only in God’s Word that you can learn how great His love for you is. It’s only in God’s Word that you can see Jesus Christ crucified on Calvary’s cross for *your* sins. It’s only in God’s Word that you can learn how He’s always near you in Christ – and most especially in His Church and the ministry carried out there by His shepherds – as they preach to you from Holy Scripture and feed you with Word, water, bread and wine. Only God’s Word can give you the confidence to call God Father. And it’s only in the knowledge of God as Father that you can finally and completely glory in the reason God’s placed you here in this world – to receive His blessings with thanksgiving, and then pass them on to others. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.