

Sunday Sermon: September 23, 2018

Sermon Text: Mark 9: 30-37

Sermon Theme: If Anyone Wants to Be First, He Must Be the Very Last

³⁰ They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, ³¹ because he was teaching his disciples. He said to 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.” ³² But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.

³³ They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the road?” ³⁴ But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.

³⁵ 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.”

³⁶ He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ “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.”

There just some words that don't seem to make sense when you put them together: jumbo shrimp, a speed walking race, to save money you have to spend money. These words and phrases seem odd and maybe a little backwards. That's because there's a contradiction built in. Shrimp should be small, not jumbo. A race is won by being fastest and walking is not the fastest way to move. Usually you either save money or spend it, not both.

Some people don't like contradictions. They don't want to figure out how this logic works. It's seems odd and foolish. Other people like to have fun with contradictions. They enjoy laughing at things that don't seem to make sense at first, but then after awhile do.

In the Word of God before us this morning, Jesus says something that sounds a lot like a contradiction, it doesn't seem to make sense at first. **If anyone wants to be first, they must be the very last and the servant of all.** As we look at the Word of God, we see that this contradiction make sense. Jesus teaches us that the life of the Christian is a contradiction in the world. Instead of reflecting the image of the world, a Christian's life reflects the image of Christ which is very different from the world.

As it was in last week's Gospel, it is the time spent traveling from one place to another that brings a teachable moment for Jesus and his disciples. Unlike last week where Jesus' question begins the discussion, this week the disciples' argument is the basis for the teaching. What they were arguing about was pretty clear. Who was the greatest among them? Who were the leaders and who were helpers?

This seems to be something that came up from time to time with the disciples. In Matthew, we read that the mother of James and John had asked Jesus to give her sons the place of honor next to him in heaven. In Luke, we read that at the table on Maundy Thursday, they were arguing about which one of the them was the greatest.

As the disciples sat at the feet of the one who was the greatest, they just couldn't stop their own sinful arrogance and ego from causing them to argue over and over again about which of them was the greatest.

They knew what they were doing was wrong. They show this by their silence. When Jesus asks them what they were arguing about, they chose to remain quiet instead of answering him.

Jesus knew what they were arguing about. He points out their sin to them and teaches them what a Christ-like attitude really looks like. **If anyone wants to be first, they must be the very last and the servant of all.**

At first this contradiction doesn't make any sense. Everybody knows that the first person in line is first and the last person the last. Everyone knows that the winner is the first person who crosses the line, not the last. But Jesus says that in his kingdom, those who want to be first, must be the last. Those who want to be the greatest will be the ones who are not served, rather they will serve others.

The disciples were dreaming of positions of power and authority. They were thinking in a very human way. We understand their thoughts because we think in the same way. Sinful people measure importance by

the amount of power, influence and authority we have. We think the point of our life is to be famous, to have people know our name, to have everyone see how important we are.

These were the same sinful thoughts of power and authority that were going through the heads of the disciples as they argued about who was the greatest. Yet, Jesus shows them that this thought of earthly power and authority was useless and worthless in his kingdom. He was looking for a different kind of people.

Each of our lessons this morning have shown us people who live in a way that contradicts the way of the world. Each of our readings shows us how we are motivated by Christ to live a Christ-like life which is opposite the way of the world.

If you remember our Old Testament reading, Miriam and Aaron, Moses' brother and sister, questioned the Lord's chosen leader. They no longer wanted to follow Moses, they wanted to be leaders too. Hasn't God spoken through us too? Why shouldn't we be as great as Moses? Sounds familiar doesn't it? It sounds a little like the power and authority that the disciples were after.

Then we look at Moses. Moses is described as the most humble man on earth. Yet, he was also the leader of a group of people that numbered over a million. He had immense responsibility given to him by God to lead God's people. But he did not seek power for himself. What would Moses do when his leadership was called into question?

The answer is Moses does nothing to save his position of power. The Lord intervenes and does it for him. It is the Lord whose anger burns against Miriam and Aaron. The Lord strikes Miriam with leprosy. It would be easy for Moses to stand by and let this happen. It would be easy for Moses to have a sense of satisfaction that they had been punished. But he doesn't do that. Instead, he prays that the Lord would forgive his brother and sister and relent. **Oh, Lord, save her.**

Do you see the contradiction? How many world leaders would intervene so that no harm would come to those who opposed them or who tried to overthrow them?

Why would Moses do this? Why would he do something that contradicted the normal thoughts and feelings that most people would have towards others who have done them wrong? Moses believed in God and the promises that God made of a Messiah from sin. Moses had seen the love that God had for him in forgiving him of his sins. God forgave Moses for murdering an Egyptian slave master. God forgave Moses for being reluctant to be the leader of the Israelites. Moses forgave Miriam and Aaron because he knew that God had forgiven him.

Every day we try to overthrow our leader, our God and King. Every day we try to lead coups against him in our own ways. We don't want to trust in God, we want to trust in ourselves. We do not want to follow his commandments and his ways, we want to do it our own way. We do not want to be under anyone's leadership, we want to handle this ourselves.

Our God has every right to punish us, even kill us for our disobedience. But he doesn't, instead he shows his love in Jesus. Jesus stood in our place to be punished for our sin and disobedience. He did that to set us free so that those sins cannot harm us anymore.

Jesus continues to show love to us by intervening for us before God. He is there to plead our case and to remind God that all of our sins are fully forgiven. There is not one that remains. We are not on probation after our sinful crimes of arrogance and pride, we are set completely free by Jesus to live a new life of faith and thanks to him that is different from the world.

If the disciples would have had the apostle James with them that day, they might have stopped arguing sooner. In our second lesson, the apostle James also showed us that the Christian life is different from the way of the world. **Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.** ¹⁸ **Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.**

We generally think that those who are important show their power and authority doing large and important things. We think of the news articles about rock stars, CEO's, politicians and athletes and think that these must be the way that we should live to. We should live so that people notice us.

Did you notice the difference that James says should show in a Christian's life? The Christian's life does not need to be lived seeking power and authority, it does not need to be lived seeking to be noticed and

acknowledged by others. James tells us that the life of the Christians is different because our wisdom and understanding is shown in humble acts of love and service to God and to others.

Jesus shows us what a life lived in humble service can and does look like. He could have ruled the world, but he didn't. His rule was not shown in power and authority, it was shown in humble obedience to his heavenly father. He walked and talked with sinners like us to lead us to the truth of salvation. In loving submission to his Father, he showed his love for a lost and sinful world by sacrificing himself to complete the plan of saving the world. He rose again to show us that his mercy has no ends. Not even death can separate us from him. In death, he will take us to be with him in heaven.

Following Jesus and being his child is different from being a part of any earthly organization. Being part of Jesus' family does not come with a call to be powerful and strong, it comes with a contradiction to be humble and gentle and serve other.

The disciples were arguing about who was the greatest. Jesus taught them a contradiction. Your faith is not shown according to the image of the world, your faith is shown by living in the image of Christ. This same type of sacrificial love that Christ has shown to us in forgiving our sins is the same type of love that he wants us to reflect to others. It might seem strange and odd in this world, that's because it is.