

Pentecost 18 (Proper 20), September 23, 2018

Sermon: Being Humble.

Text: Mark 9:30–37

Other Lessons: Jeremiah 11:18–20; Psalm 54; James 3:13–4:10;

Jeremiah 11:18–20

18 The Lord made it known to me and I knew; then you showed me their deeds. **19** But I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter. I did not know it was against me they devised schemes, saying, “Let us destroy the tree with its fruit, let us cut him off from the land of the living, that his name be remembered no more.” **20** But, O Lord of hosts, who judges righteously, who tests the heart and the mind, let me see your vengeance upon them, for to you have I committed my cause.

James 3:13–4:10

13 Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. **14** But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. **15** This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. **16** For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. **17** But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. **18** And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? **2** You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. **3** You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. **4** You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. **5** Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, “He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us”? **6** But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” **7** Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. **8** Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. **9** Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. **10** Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

Mark 9:30–37

30 They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, **31** for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise.” **32** But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him.

33 And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you discussing on the way?” **34** But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. **35** And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.” **36** And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, **37** “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.”

I’ve decided to make a change in my life. I’ve really been working hard at it, too. Already this morning I’ve put a tremendous amount of time and effort into this pivotal change. You see, I have determined to become more humble in my life. I’ve been working very hard at this, and I must say...I have been nothing short of awesome in my pursuit of humility. I am the best, most humble person I’ve ever met! No one can hold a candle to my humility. I just wanted all of you to know and to share in my joy, to share in my awesomeness, and to celebrate my humility with me.

Now, I would hope that by now you’ve picked up on the fact that this is a purely satirical introduction. Just think about how ludicrous it sounds to boast about your humility; to trumpet how awesome you are at being humble. Clearly, such posturing would

no doubt indicate that this “humble” individual doesn’t have a clue as to what goes into being truly humble. Instead of portraying true humility, it would only reveal the sad fact that they really are clueless. They don’t get it.

As we look at the Gospel lesson for today, we discover, once again, that the apostles fall into this sad and foolish category. Jesus is teaching—again—that He is going to be betrayed and arrested and killed and resurrected, His glorious mission of redemption. He’s teaching them about what His greatness and their greatness is going to look like in the eyes of God and the eyes of man. His greatness—the fullness of God’s just and righteous wrath and unconditional, limitless love—will be witnessed in all its glory right here in the utter lowliness and humility on the cross. Here is God at His lowest and His highest. Here is the ultimate display of God’s wrath against sin and God’s love for you.

And yet...after hearing this teaching again and again, these same disciples do what they do best and waste no time in arguing about who is the greatest in the kingdom of God. How sad! They truly didn’t get it. Their idea of greatness had nothing to do with God’s idea of greatness.

Now before we look down at such foolishness, we need to take an

honest look in the mirror at our own daily reality. How often we behave the same exact way, posturing and boasting about all of our “faithful, humble service done in the name of Jesus.” How often we measure faithfulness and greatness using Old Adam’s measuring sticks. For instance, we measure ourselves and others; we measure our deeds and the deeds of others in terms of financial gain or friendship numbers or attendance stats or Facebook likes. Who was more successful? Who made more money? Whose clique is bigger? Whose Facebook post gets more “thumbs up” (likes)? Like insecure high schoolers, we measure ourselves in terms of popularity, as if being more popular or more liked by the rest of the world somehow translates into being more right with God.

We even measure matters of faith—doctrine and practice—in terms of popularity. If the majority doesn’t like it, then it’s bad for business to keep doing it. If the majority of people like something and are in favor of something, then it must be good and God-pleasing, right? If the majority likes it, then it’s something we have to do. That’s the same mentality the Israelites were using when it came to deciding whether or not they should manufacture a golden calf.

We all confess with our lips that such things [works] don’t count

for anything in terms of salvation and mercy and forgiveness, and yet when things aren't going the way we want or planned; when life takes an unexpected and unwelcomed turn south, we're the first ones to cry out as if we've been wronged or cheated or short-changed. We cry out to our fellow Christians and against God. "I do all this, and this is the thanks I get? It's not fair!

And make no mistakes: We all do it. In fact, the devil wants nothing more than for us to posture and elbow and peacock about. He rejoices when we start boasting and bragging about all that we do, holding up our works and deeds as things that merit, or at least ought to merit, God's favor and blessing. The devil rejoices when we show just how little we truly understand about this [the crucifix].

Now, I know that some of you are already thinking ahead, about where Jesus introduces a small child into the midst of these adults, taking this little one into His arms and saying, "**Whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me, and whoever receives Me, receives not Me but Him who sent Me.**" There it is, right? There's the moral of the story; the aim and goal of every Christian...to be the little child in Christ's arms; the humble little child, who brings nothing to the table but faith; the one who can do nothing to compete against and outdo all those around him, and yet the same one whom Christ says is greatest in the kingdom of

heaven.

But...is that what Jesus was saying here? Look at the text. There is no command recorded here for us to be childlike. Well, it is true, as St. Matthew records, that Christ did place a small child in the midst of His disciples and instruct them that unless they turned and repented and became like little children in their humility, they would never enter into the kingdom of heaven. But even in Matthew's account, Christ was stressing the humility aspect; the completely helpless and passive aspect of childhood which can offer nothing in exchange for all the undeserved love and mercy and care shown to them. All the child can do is receive and give thanks.

But that's not what St. Mark records for us in this text. No, He is teaching His apostles about true humility. Here in these words our Lord is teaching His apostles, not to be like the child, but rather to lower themselves even more and receive this child just as they would receive Him. In a very real and no-nonsense way, our Lord is calling His apostles to become lower than the smallest child; to be the lowest of the low, truly last of all, and servant to everyone... even the smallest little child.

Now, first off, it doesn't mean that we let the littlest kids have all

the say and drive the proverbial bus. So many adults are so busy trying to be their kids' and grandkids' buddies that they've completely abdicated and forsaken their vocational responsibilities to be the heads of the household. This is NOT what Christ was getting at with these words of receiving and serving the littlest of children.

Rather, your Lord was pointing to the ultimate faithful posture; the ultimate humility that is willing to bow down and serve all—even the tiniest ones—in recognition that they are serving Christ in the process. But contrary to what is often believed, your Lord is not teaching here about doing all kinds of deeds and works. This is precisely what got the apostles in trouble in the first place.

Rather, this is a lesson about faithfully serving God by ultimately lowering oneself and submitting to His way and His will, no matter how crazy or unassuming or lowly or unsuccessful it may seem to you. What does Christ look like in action? Sometimes it looks like and sounds like the least popular, least influential, least spectacular and powerful thing. It's as simple as the spoken Word. Faith does come through hearing. It's as simple as ordinary water, ordinary bread, and ordinary wine. How often we think we know better though.

This is precisely why I will not stand here today and instruct you on what you need to do in your service to God and neighbor. Instead, I am going to do exactly what my Lord teaches, and I'm going to simply point to Him, His all-redeeming victory and His all-atoning, life-saving, life-giving gifts and means of grace. Oh, I'd love to give you methods for becoming more successful and happier in your individual lives and the corporate life of this congregation. However, I have to trust that my Lord and Savior knows what He's doing. "Preach the Word, in season and out of season." That's it. I point you to Him and His means of grace.

This is the service your Lord speaks of today. In fact, this is the highest form of God-pleasing service there is: to simply receive and give thanks for His undeserved grace, mercy, and peace; to share and make this Gospel Good News known to everyone He died for. Talk about the lowest of the low, and yet the most powerful and glorious! Here is Almighty God at His lowest, and at the same time, at His very best, unconditional love for us. This is what it's all about. This is what saves man. This Word of the cross, scandal to some and folly to others, is the sole source of life and deliverance and hope to all who hear and believe.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, may God bless you with the humility of faith to do just that; to hear and believe, repent and

turn, and rejoice over all that He has done for you and for all mankind in His all-redeeming death and resurrection.

AMEN

May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.