

## **“Who wants to be the greatest?” Mark 9:30-37**

**They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, 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.” But they did not understand the saying and were afraid to ask him.**

**And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you discussing on the way?” But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. 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.”**

**And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.”**

It is interesting, people can be together, but at the same times miles and miles apart. Together physically, but separated in their thought, their perception, their understanding of things. Alone in the crowd, so to speak.

Our today's reading from the Gospel according Mark gives us a perfect illustration. Jesus is together with His disciples. He has been physically together with them for years. Days and night. Physically.

And at the same time, it seems quite clear that He is alone, He is separated even from His closest ones by their ignorance, by their inability to understand Him. We read that Jesus again and again makes the effort to teach them about His mission, to explain them what He has come to do, what is going to happen, but ... they just wouldn't get it.

“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.” But they did not understand the saying and were afraid to ask him.

Mark has recorded three times when Jesus tried to teach His disciples about what is going to happen in Jerusalem. But this one in a way is the harshest, not just for the disciples, but for us as well.

Teaching about His mission elsewhere Jesus names His opposition, – the scribes, and the elders, and the chief priests, and we can feel relieved in a way, we are good, its them, those evil people, they crucified Jesus.

It is different here. What Jesus says is quite inclusive. The Son of Man will be delivered in the hands of men... The Eternal Son of God, who voluntarily took on our flesh, will be delivered into the hands of humanity. The Creator gives Himself in the hands of His rebellious human creatures.

Jesus doesn't speak about any separate group of particularly evil and merciless people. He speaks about all people, and it includes all of us. "And they will kill Him." And we did kill Him. There is no taking the high ground, there is no pointing fingers at others.

We all, our sin killed our God when He gave Himself in our hands. "But they [the disciples] did not understand the saying and were afraid to ask him." They did not understand... They were together with Jesus for years! They had heard Him teaching and preaching.

They had witnessed all His miracles. Jesus had handpicked them and specifically tried to teach them, and they didn't understand ... and were afraid to ask. I think this begs the question.

How well do we understand what Jesus is teaching us? Do we understand? Or maybe we don't and are just afraid to ask. Or maybe we think we don't need to. Or maybe we think that we better or smarter than the Twelve? This is something to reflect on...

What the disciples did next makes perfect sense. Okay, they didn't get what Jesus was teaching them, let's focus on what they could understand. Who is the greatest? That's a conversation where they all were glad to participate.

Would be interesting to hear what they said, how they compared themselves. But once they got to their destination, Capernaum, Jesus asked them. "What were you discussing on the way?" Ups... suddenly they went silent as children caught in mischief.

We are strange creatures, aren't we? The disciples didn't get what Jesus was teaching. They didn't get when He was telling them that He loves them so much that He is going to sacrifice His life for them.

They were together, but at the same time so far apart from one another. Or as people sometimes say, what Jesus was teaching them just went above their heads. Too hard, Jesus, too hard...

But instead of trying to understand what their Master was teaching, they focused on something that even they themselves realized wasn't the noblest question to address. That's why they went silent... aren't we often the same?

We can only marvel about Jesus' patience with them, and with us as well. Jesus speaks about His sacrifice, they speak about their gains. Jesus speaks about giving up everything for the sake of others, the disciples, the closest disciples argue with one another trying to elevate themselves.

O this patient Jesus! He just keeps teaching them... and us. And what He says next sounds strange when we hear it first. "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." What do you think about this saying?

It is a good thing that someone tries to be great? Jesus didn't say that striving to be great is something bad. What He does, He re-defines what greatness is. It is not about 'me', it is about others. It is not about elevating ourselves, it is about being the last of all and the servant of all. The greatness of Christians is in our littleness. It seems so strange and contra-intuitive.

In this world we are used to think about greatness differently. If you are one of the greats, then everyone serves you. The more people serve you, or work for you, or are under your authority, the greater you are.

Jesus turns this around. Want to be great? Okay, good. Go for it! But do it as my disciples. Do it as I do it. Do it by serving others. Isn't this wonderful? Can you see the beauty of what Jesus says?

If you want to be truly great, meaning, if you want to be great in the eyes of the Triune God, then the way to achieve it is by becoming servant of all. It means that we all can strive for true, genuine greatness.

It means that greatness isn't reserved for a chosen few mighty of this world. We all have so many people whom God the Father has placed in our lives. They are our path to greatness. As we serve them all putting them first.

As Jesus described it in our last Sunday's reading, – deny yourself, take your cross and follow me. Hear well what He says! Follow me! Jesus doesn't say, – you take your cross and go ahead. No!

He actually goes first. He becomes servant of all. He serves every human being by laying down His life for us. For you as well. There is no greater sacrifice, no greater service than giving up one's life for others. And this is what Jesus has done for you.

Jesus served us walking the most painful path, through sufferings and death on the cross. He sets an example what it means to be servant of all. And He becomes the last of all. He becomes the despised and rejected.

He becomes the mocked and beaten. He becomes the crucified and abandoned. He truly becomes the last of all, left hanging of the cross even by the closed, killed by those who He came to rescue.

Jesus doesn't command us to do something that He wasn't willing to do. He serves each one of us, and He gives up His life for each one of us, and He does it first, and only then invites us to follow Him.

When you hear about what Jesus has done for you, does it move you to sacrifice yourself for others? Does it move you to humble yourself and to be the last of all and the servant of all? This is not an easy one...

This is, why we need to hear and understand what follows. Jesus "took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever

receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.” We need to get this right. Because what happens here is the sweetest melody to our ears, and a healing balm to our hearts. The disciples were arguing about who was the greatest. Jesus redefined what true greatness is – to be the last and the servant of all.

Then He takes this child, and in that culture people didn’t think about children as we often do today. Children were not the center of the Universe. They were the last in the household, the least important.

And Jesus takes someone who all of them could agree was the last of them. He puts this child in the midst of all those who were striving for this worldly greatness, and then He takes this child in His arms.

For Jesus you are like this child... As you try to follow Jesus, as you try to be the last and the servant of all, Jesus identifies with you and He embraces you. He puts His arms around you. And He says the words that change everything.

“Whoever receives one such child [like you] in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me” [the Father]. Jesus gives the ultimate dignity and greatness to those who try to follow Him being servants of all.

Because as you humble yourself, Jesus lifts you up. Jesus identifies with you. And similarly as elsewhere Jesus says to you – “if someone receives you, they receive me”. And if they receive Jesus, they receive the Father.

It doesn’t get greater than this. You can’t be greater than this. Your Master, your Lord and Savior lies down His life for you. He shows you the way of true greatness by walking it first. And He invites you to follow Him.

Not in your own power, but together with Him, as Jesus Himself puts His hands around you. As He sends His Spirit to dwell in you. As He promises to be with you till the end of this age.

This is our humble lesson for today. Strive for greatness! Walk with your Lord! How? By being the last and the servant of all. For our greatness doesn’t come from the glory and recognition of this world, it comes from the cross which we carry together with Jesus.

And everything that we may hope for, everything that we long for deep in our hearts awaits us as our reward on the other side of the cross. That’s where the resurrected Jesus will meet us, and that is where we by God’s grace are heading. Amen.