

“Go, strive for greatness!” 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.”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!
The Word of God is so deep and so multifaceted. It speaks to every aspect of our lives. Thus, this sermon probably will be a bit different. Let's see.

This account by Mark could be called funny, if it wasn't so sad. Mark tells us how Jesus and His handpicked disciples were passing through Galilee to Capernaum and while on their way Jesus was teaching them. What was He teaching 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.” That sounds like a scary prediction and the one which should make His disciples to consider what exactly it means – to follow this Jesus. Do you know where their thoughts went?

Jesus actually asked them the same question. **“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.** That's it, that was the most important thing to discuss after Jesus had foretold His sufferings and death.

Who is the greatest?! Sure, make sense. What else would they be reflecting on?! If not on their own greatness. As I said, we could say that this situation as Mark has described it for us is almost funny, except that it is so sad.

This is what our sin does to us. Not only with the disciples, but with all of us. It makes us deaf to what God speaks to us, and self-absorbed. They heard what Jesus was teaching them. This wasn't the first time. At least second, according to Mark.

When we hear Jesus words “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” – are they so mysterious, so inscrutable, totally incomprehensible?

No, the saying is very simple and plain. But how does our sinful mind take it in? Just as the disciples did. **“But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him.”** Too difficult, let’s just focus on the important stuff: “Who is the greatest?”

This little incident illuminates our situation as well. How often it happens with us that we hear the voice of Jesus, the words of Jesus, His message and ... somehow, we don’t get it. Somehow these simple and plain words seem too hard for us.

Why to focus so much of those things of God, shouldn’t we reflect on something that is much more down to earth, to our lives, to something practical and useful? For example, we could focus on – who is the greatest?

Surely, the whole situation seems childish from where we sit now. But don’t be deceived, too often we are not much different. Too often we are more concerned and more interested in matters of this world than we are in the things of God.

When we are in a trouble, surely, then we worry about how can we survive, how can we make it, who can help us? But what do we dream about when all is well? Our gaze goes up... How could we prosper? How could we rise up in this life?

How could we get more recognition? How could we achieve more greatness according to the values and standards of this world? How can we be the greatest? It seems that there is something build into us. A drive.

A drive for greatness, for excellence, for success, for achievements. To be better... comparing with others, whichever we way choose to compare ourselves. For some it is about who can gain more, acquire more, experience more, see more, conquer more, be in the spotlight more, and so on.

For other it can be about who can spend less, waste less, recycle more, who is the most ascetic, who is the most content, who is the most modest in their lives, and so on. Do you think these pursuits are that different? One good and another bad?

They actually are very similar. The difference is that the former is about who is the greatest by gathering more, the latter is about who is the greatest by choosing to live simply. But they both are about me being the greatest, whatever the game I play.

It seems that we can’t escape from this drive. And what is really interesting is what Jesus does with it. **“Jesus 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.”**

This is very interesting. This drive in us, this impulse, this ambition – did you notice what Jesus did with it? He didn’t say: “Come on, guys, just relax, don’t worry about anything, just chill, I’ve got this, you don’t need to do anything.”

Sometimes there is this misunderstanding, usually among those outside the Church, but sometimes also among Christians, that being a Christian, a disciple of Jesus

means that you are just a passive person, relying on your God to do all things for you, without passion, without this drive to do and achieve and make. But nothing can be further from the truth. Just listen to Jesus!

What did He say? He sat down, gathered His disciples around and we could say that He gave them – an alternative story. “You want to be the greatest? Do you really want it? Great! Go for it! Just let me tell you how to go about it.”

If people live with the story that this world and this life is all that there is... then it makes sense to try to make the most out of it. When, if not now? Clock is ticking, time is running out, rush and try to be the greatest, however you understand it.

What matters and what makes the whole difference is the story. Which one is your story? How do you see this world? What Jesus did, He gave His disciples a different, alternative, much more beautiful story.

“That is good that you want to be the greatest, and this is the way to go – **if anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.**” See, Jesus keeps bringing them home the same message that we discussed the last time.

“Deny yourself, don’t focus on yourself, focus on others, love your neighbour as yourself, consider others as more significant than yourself, look not only for your interest, but for the interests of others. Choose, decide, commit to be the servant of all. Do it intentionally and deliberately. Go for it!” This is what Jesus tells them.

Can you see how He changes their point of reference, their system of values? The greatest are not those who achieve the most for themselves, but those who achieve the most for others; those who commit to serve every person in their lives.

By the way, our Dr Luther articulated this teaching so clearly and powerfully, that it literally changed the Western society. We are talking about the teaching on vocation. Remember, we have discussed it numerous times. Just to remind...

Our God is God the Creator, He not only brought everything into existence, not only fashioned and designed this wonderful Universe and this incredible planet with all the sophisticated and fine-tuned laws, but He Himself daily keeps everything ticking.

He is the source of all life, and He is the One who provides for everyone. Meaning, He takes care and is involved with everything that happens. We could say – He serves everyone. Now, and this is where the rubber hits the road.

How does our Triune God care for every human being, how does He serve us? For one, He does it through His creation, providing for us air to breathe, water to drink and food to eat, etc. But then, more specifically He cares for us through His human creatures, through us. We can see it already in the very beginning, in Genesis 1.

The Creator does the heavy lifting, He prepares this home for us and it is “very good” and then He invited us to participate, He entrusts us to share in His divine, creative activities. “Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and have dominion over it!”

This so called the 1st Great Commission begins with each one of us. Our Triune God has built into each one of you, what we could call – an infinite potential. As we grow, we learn and begin to discover our abilities and talents that He has given us.

We begin to develop them and soon we need to realize that there will always remain more skills to develop and knowledge and wisdom to acquire than we are able in this lifetime. So, we need to choose what will be the most beneficial for others.

For everything that is given to us, is given also for the sake of others. So that our Triune God can use us to care, to provide for and to serve every human being. For He works through you. That’s how Luther summarized the teaching on vocation.

This is where Jesus’ teaching from today comes is. He invites us to see every person in our life, whom God has placed before you, as someone whom He has called you to serve. You want to be the greatest? This is how we do it in a godly way.

In every relationship, with every person ask the question: “How can my God the Creator, how can my Father in heaven use me and everything that He has given me to serve this person?” Reflect on this question and see what picture emerges.

We all have multiple family vocations as children, siblings, parents, spouses, grandparents, etc. We all have multiple vocation is community, in our workplaces, among our neighbours, in our social activities, in our congregations. Want to be the greatest? Be intentional about serving all those many people.

Besides, this does not necessarily mean that if we are Christians, we would be engaging only in certain activities. We are free and encouraged to engage any activity that can somehow serve the well-being of our neighbours.

We don’t differ from the world so much by what we do, but why we do it. Our drive is no longer about us; it is about pleasing our God as we strive to be servants of all. You can serve in your family vocations, you can serve in your workplaces, you can serve as a CEO of multinational corporation, you can serve as public servant in government, artist, farmer, engineer, sales person, etc.

What Jesus says is – use everything that your God has given to you serving others. Okay, it may sound rather honourable way of looking at our affairs. Nice story. But how exactly will that make us the greatest? Jesus answers this as well. Just listen.

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.”

What does this mean? For one, Jesus emphasises that we are called to serve those who are in need, who may be depended on the care of others, on our care, those who have the greatest need to be served. This is what the visual with the child teaches.

But then, see what follows. When we receive, welcome, care, serve those in need, just like such child, we receive, welcome, care and serve who? Yes, Jesus Himself! Our service to others is the way we serve Jesus, and not only Jesus.

This is how we receive also our Father who is in heaven, this is how we serve our serving God. There is no one greater than the Triune God, and there is no greater occupation and honour than serving with the Triune God and serving Him. If you want to be greatest, that's the way, according to Jesus.

Finally, remember also the first part of today's Gospel. **"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."** This is the heart of our story.

We are privileged to serve this God who always serves first. He serves us as our Creator. Then He kindly invites us to participate in His creative work. But then He also serves us as our Redeemer. Even when we turned away from our Creator, when we focused on ourselves to care about our greatness, He never abandoned us.

He reveals how much He values us, how much He values you, by laying down His life for us. But He also reveals that death is not the end. Our story, your story is not about this world only. There is something much greater coming.

The resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. This is your story. It begins here, and for you it will continue and unfold in New Heavens and New Earth. You are created for great responsibilities already in this age, and Jesus has redeemed you so that you can serve in them well.

So, yes, go for it! Strive for greatness, strive to lead a holy life as Jesus has made you holy, strive to be the servants of all, for the day is coming when our service will be over. Then you will be kindly welcomed by our Risen Lord, who went ahead of us to prepare a place for you.

Glory to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit!

Amen.