

There Is One Who is Greatest

Mark 9:30-37

The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 20, 2015

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Broadlands

One of the things that I fear on the Day of Judgment is the interrogation of our Lord. I know that the Lord will not ask us any questions, but He could. The Scriptures do not say that the Lord will ask us any questions, but it does say that we will have to give an account of the life that we have lived in the body whether good or evil. That being the case, I fear the interrogation. Many of you have observed that the Lord will not need to ask any questions on the Day of Judgment because He already knows everything. While that is true an account of our lives will still need to be given to our Lord on the Last Day when we stand before His judgment seat.

That being the case, I fear the interrogation. I fear for us Christians. I fear for myself. I fear for the denominations that our sins have created within Christianity. I am worried that we Lutherans and Methodists and Catholics and nondenominational evangelicals and Baptists and Presbyterians will all stand in front of our Lord on the great Day of Judgment and He will ask us what we had been discussing with each other while we were in this earthly life. And we will all have to be silent in front of Him because we were all arguing about which of us was the greatest.

And it doesn't even have to happen in between denominations, it also happens within denominations. How many of you have been ashamed of our synodical or district officials? How many of you have disputed with them? How many of you plain old don't like them? How many of you believe that if you were in their position you would be doing a better job than they would? You believe you would be kinder. You believe that you would be more loving than they are or have been. You believe that you are greater than them.

And it doesn't even have to happen in the greater church body. It happens within our congregation. We look at other members of the congregation and we assess their spirituality. We check the number of times they have been to the Divine Service and we know that we have been to the Divine Service more than they have. And obviously we are greater because we have gone more than they have. Different members of the congregation will deem themselves better than other members of the congregation because they have successfully avoided certain vices. Some members of the congregation will think that they are better members than other members of the congregation because they volunteer more of their time to the congregation than others do. Some exalt themselves because they give more money than others do. Some exalt themselves because they believe that they would be better serving in certain offices of the congregation than the ones who have been elected. Some members think they are better than other members because they have never committed adultery and they know members who have or some members think they are greater because they avoid gossip unlike other members of the congregation who freely judge others.

We all argue about who is the greatest.

Obviously the Lord does not care which of us thinks that we are the greatest. He tells us to watch out for His name and wherever His name is to honor it. The example that our Lord provides is a small child. The child that He brought into His arms was probably anywhere from one to five years of age. Jesus then proposes a situation where such a child bears His name. If such a child bears His name even to the apostles themselves, the apostles are expected to receive that child.

When we talk about receiving someone whom Jesus sends this means more than showing them hospitality in our homes. This means that we also receive the message that such a person bears. So that even if a child who is one to five years of age bears the name of Jesus the apostles themselves are not only to receive that child, they are also to receive the message that child brings. It does not matter that Jesus has called the apostles to be fishers of men. It does not matter that Jesus Himself has given them authority to cast out demons. It does not matter that Jesus has given them the authority to preach that the Kingdom of God is at hand in their day and has come in ours. It does not matter that Jesus gave them authority to heal the sick and raise the dead. In spite of the fact that the apostles have such amazing authority from our Lord that they can even write inspired Scripture, if they encounter even a small child who has the name of Jesus on him, they are to receive his message.

And so it does not matter if one is the pastor or an elder in the congregation, if even a child bears the name of Jesus and has a message from Him we are to receive that message from Jesus. When we do so, we receive Jesus Himself and when we receive Jesus Himself we receive not only Jesus but also the One who sent Jesus.

In our egalitarian day and age we have taken these passages of the Gospels and misunderstood them. We read that Jesus exalts little children and we think that means that Jesus has made them to be the equal of adults. We mistakenly believe that they should be accorded the same rights as adults. We try to treat them like adults even though nature says otherwise. We idealize children as if everything they have to say is wise. While they may occasionally say things that are wise due to their innocence, by and large children are under the authority of their parents for the child's good. Without parents the child would be lost.

Our Lord is not proposing the equality of children and adults when He says what He says to His apostles about children. What our Lord is proposing is that you and I keep watch for whomever it is that bears His name. Such people who bear the name of Jesus will also bear the message of Jesus. And sometimes Jesus appoints the strangest of people to bear His name and bear His message to us. It comes from the most unlikely of people and yet there it is and it cannot be ignored.

In my own personal experience I have received the message of Jesus from one who bore the name of Jesus even before he was baptized. He gave me the message of Jesus even before he was baptized. It was the message of Jesus. It was even from the Scripture, but it was a message that I had long overlooked because of my focus on other concerns in the Scriptures. So do not be surprised when even the seemingly unbeliever delivers to you the message of Jesus. Even Isaiah said that Cyrus and unbelieving Persian would do the will of God.

Sometimes it is our enemies who bear the name of Jesus and bear His message. Jesus then calls upon us in humility to listen to the one who bears His name and His message even if that person is someone that we consider an enemy.

Sometimes it is someone whom the community despises. There are members of our congregation whom other members of the congregation consider to be of a lower place than themselves. Either the member is less wealthy or he is less organized or he is less successful or he is arrogant and prideful or he has a loose tongue or he has certain obvious vices that offend us. What happens when that member of the congregation who bears the name of Jesus also bears His message to us? If we receive such a member, we receive Jesus. In other words, if we listen to the message of Jesus that that person brings to us, then we are receiving Jesus. And when we receive Jesus, we receive not only Jesus, but also the One who sent Him.

What matters is the name of Jesus not the person who is bearing it. And I guarantee you Jesus will put His name and His message on someone whom you look down on in order to see whether or not His name and His message are more important to you than your judgment on someone else's worth.

What happens when the five year old bears the name and the message of Jesus? If you receive such a child, you receive Jesus, and when you receive Jesus, you receive the One who sent Jesus.

All of this is necessary in order to receive Jesus. If you are unwilling to receive the Jesus who comes to you in a person that you despise, how are you ever going to receive the Jesus who is betrayed into the hands of men, killed by them, and is raised from the dead?

Anyone who is willing to receive Jesus even from someone whom they despise is able to receive the Jesus who is crucified. When anyone receives the Jesus who is crucified they receive the One who sent Jesus.

This is why the apostles do not ask Jesus about His prediction regarding His crucifixion and resurrection. They do not want to know. They know that Peter told Jesus that it was not a good idea that He be crucified and they remember that Jesus rebuked Peter and called Peter of the devil. They remember that Jesus told Peter that he was not thinking the things of God, but rather the things of men. They all agree with Peter or they would be questioning Him on the meaning of His words. Their silence is a denial of the crucifixion of our Lord.

We human beings do not like to ask the relevant questions. We ask irrelevant question. We ask irrelevant questions because it soothes our conscience. We tell ourselves that at least we asked something. But what we ask is irrelevant. The reason that we do not ask relevant questions is because we are afraid of the answers. The reason that we do not acknowledge the people who come in the name of Jesus is because we are afraid of what they may say or we may not like it.

And so the disciples don't ask about the crucifixion. They are hoping that it will not happen. Of course if it does not happen then Jesus is a liar and there is no resurrection. There is no defeat of death.

It is only when Jesus is crucified that you finally see who is last in the Kingdom of God. The one who is last in the Kingdom of God is the One who bears the sins of all even though He does not deserve them. He is the One who atones for the sins of all, even though He does not have to. When Jesus is crucified you finally can identify the One who has served all. He has served all of you. He has served You by bearing God's wrath in your place. He has served You by atoning for all of Your sins. He continues to serve You His crucified body and shed blood in order to forgive You of Your sins. He served You not only when He died for you. He serves You now when He serves You His supper. He is the One who serves all of you and when He serves all of you He serves all. And this is how you know who is greatest in the Kingdom of God.

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.