

Standing Tall
Mark 9:30-37
October 7, 2012

They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, 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." But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it. They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?" But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. 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." He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, "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."

Grace, mercy, and peace from the God who loves us enough to serve us our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Today's Gospel reading sounds like two unrelated stories. In this reading we see two different scenes that, at first glance, don't seem to have a connection to each other. In the first scene, Jesus tells his disciples about his impending betrayal, death, and resurrection. In the second scene, we see the disciples arguing over which of them was the greatest. However, there is a connection and, when we make that connection, we will see how the first scene sheds a revealing light on the teaching of the second scene.

When the text opens, Jesus has taken his disciples away from the crowds, away from the hustle and bustle of life in the ministry. What Jesus was about to tell his disciples was going to require their full attention. What those men were about to hear was too important to be mixed with the cacophony of the demanding voices of the multitude that followed Jesus.

When there was sufficient distance between this little group and the rest of the world, Jesus made a shocking disclosure. He told his disciples that he didn't come to set up an earthly kingdom. This seems like a "no brainer" to us but, to the disciples, this shattered their human expectations.

For a couple thousand years, the Jewish nation had been waiting for its Messiah – its Savior. The Messiah was particularly important at the time of Jesus' earthly life because the Roman Empire had most of known world under its control. What most of the Jews of that day, including the disciples, wanted was someone who would run out the Romans and establish a new Jewish state.

But Jesus didn't come to put his disciples in key political positions. Jesus came to do battle, but he didn't come to fight a civil war or start an insurrection. Jesus came to wage a spiritual war for the souls of mankind. Jesus came to die and that eventuality was coming fast.

I said that the disciples didn't want to hear what Jesus had to say, but that's not exactly correct. The fact of the matter is they wouldn't hear it. Their ears heard Jesus' words, but their brains refused to listen. Much like what happens with many Christians today when they hear God's Word proclaimed. As long as they like they hear they are tuned in. But as soon as they hear something that violates the way they think things should be, they stick their fingers in their ears and scream la la la la la la la la la.

The disciples tuned out Jesus' clear testimony of what was to come and, instead, focused on who was going to be secretary of state and who was going to be secretary of the interior. The disciples wanted a little pay off for the hours spend plodding around the hot desert with Jesus. They wanted to be in control of things. They had their fill of fishing nets. They didn't necessarily want to be king of the mountain but they each wanted to be second in command. They were ambitious and ambition is a hunger that is never satisfied.

Of course, Jesus knew what the disciples had been discussing. He asked what their conversation was about but his question was only to segue into an important point about Christian living. We need to unpack the implications of this teaching because it is no less important today than it was 2000 years ago.

The disciples wanted a top-down structure. They wanted everything to flow from the ones on top and they wanted to be the ones on top. Does that sound familiar? The cry of our modern society is "It's all about me." But that selfish feeling isn't new. In the text, the disciples weren't concerned about Jesus' announcement of his upcoming death. They weren't concerned about the masses of unbelievers who were on a death march into hell. They were only concerned about status, happiness, contentment, and comfort for themselves.

The disciples ignored Jesus' words because they didn't want to hear what he had to say, but those disciples aren't alone. Today, many Christians come into church with an attitude of, "Don't tell me anything I don't want to hear;" "Don't say anything that makes me feel uncomfortable;" "Don't challenge me to do or accept new things;" "Just make me feel all warm and fuzzy inside." But the Christian life isn't about feeling warm and fuzzy – it's all about service – it's all about work.

Jesus explains that the pathway to greatness is a road through the land of humility. The ones who will stand the tallest are the ones who stoop the lowest to serve. A story is told of a woman who hung this motto over her kitchen sink, "Divine service is conducted here three times daily."

The road to true greatness is walked in service to God by serving one's neighbor. The greatest service is rendered to the most needy, the lowest of society, the least deserving. When we serve those in need, we never know whom we are serving. The author of the book of Hebrews tells us: *Be ready with a meal or a bed when it's needed. Why, some have extended hospitality to angels without ever knowing it!* (Heb 13:2 Msg).

Serving others always involves giving. Any service that doesn't involve sacrifice, can't be more than the weakest form of service. True service should infringe on our possessions as well as our time. True service is a matter of giving up what we have out of consideration for what someone else needs. That giving might be our wealth, our things, or our time. It might even be sacrificing our worship style so we can speak a new language the unbeliever better understands.

I've used the word sacrifice so we must take just a moment to be sure we don't confuse two important, but different, points. Jesus tells us that we must be willing to sacrifice everything for him. We may not be asked to surrender everything, but we must be willing to if the time comes.

That point differs from our service and sacrifice for our neighbor because that service is not just a willingness, it's an action. The Lord doesn't want us to wait around to see if any service opportunities show up. He wants us out beating the bushes looking for ways to serve the needy.

I can guarantee you the highest accolades will go to the Christian who bent over backward to serve. The highest praise will go to the one who willingly sacrificed his or her level of comfort for someone different from themselves. God's nod of approval goes to the person who throws away his life so that others might feel the love of God through his actions and his words. There is no spot in heaven where selfishness will be accepted.

I promised to tie Jesus' prediction of his death and the disciples' argument. To see the connection, we must first remind ourselves just who we are talking about.

Jesus is God Almighty. He created and controls the universe and all that it contains. He gouged out the oceans and piled up the mountains. He painted the sunset and crafted the seasons. He gave life to the plants and animals. He lovingly formed man from the ground.

Jesus is also the Savior of the nations. He developed and executed the plan of salvation and then made that plan available to all people. If anyone ever had a right to demand that others serve him, it was Jesus. But that's not how it was.

When Jesus walked this earth, he gave everything he had for the sake of others. The only time Jesus took for himself was when he went off alone to pray. Jesus is our example of how to live out the love of God for the benefit of the world. A few examples are in order.

In those days, a woman without a man to take care of her was as good as dead. Women didn't own property and they didn't work jobs. Such a woman without a man was the widow of Nain. With her husband gone and her only son now dead, this woman was in serious trouble. But in the Gospel of Luke we read: *When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said: "Don't cry." Then he went up and touched the coffin, and*

those carrying it stood still. He said, “Young man, I say to you, get up!” The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother (Luke 7:13-15 NIV).

Twice, when Jesus had been preaching for a long time, he stopped to feed the people (Matt 14:13-21 and Matt 15:29-38). Both times, Jesus put aside his agenda for the people's welfare. Besides these, the Gospels are full of accounts of Jesus healing the sick, defending the outcast, calming fears, and preaching the Good News to the lost. The one to whom everything was due gave away everything he had.

Christ's life was a tremendous object lesson for the disciples and for us. Even though Jesus is the king of the nations, he died for the nations. Even though we are a sinful and selfish people, he loves us in spite of ourselves. On the cross Jesus paid the price we could never afford to buy us a prize we could never deserve – salvation.

Because of what Jesus has done for us, we are no longer slaves to our sinful nature. With the help of the Holy Spirit, we have the ability to live as God's free and forgiven people. That means we can toss our lives to the wind and bend down in humble service to God by performing humble service for others. Pride and selfishness are gone because we have Grace.

We can join our Savior in the thought that we are not here to be served but to serve and to give our lives for others.