

St. Peter Evangelical Lutheran Church Modesto, California
The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
October 12, 2003

Sermon by Pastor Jonathan Micheel

Mark 9:30-37

³⁰ They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, ³¹ 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." ³² But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.

³³ They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?" ³⁴ But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.

³⁵ 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."

³⁶ He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ "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." (NIV)

Christ Redefines the Path to Greatness

Brothers and sisters of our Lord,

If I were an elected official in Sacramento, I might be a little scared. Last week, millions of voters in our state said that they would rather have someone leading our state who has zero experience in government—they would rather have him than someone with years of experience. They went against conventional wisdom and said that you don't need to be a veteran politician to be governor. You just need to be, well, Arnold Schwarzenegger. California voters just redefined the path to the governor's mansion.

Jesus does some redefining of his own; we heard him in today's Gospel. Jesus Christ redefines the path to greatness for his disciples. He tells them how to be truly great. And we're not talking about how to be famous or a celebrity or even the governor. Jesus means how to be great in God's estimation. When Jesus talks about the path to greatness, he doesn't follow people's ideas or the wisdom of this world. He radically redefines the path to greatness. Let's see what this meant for him and what this means for us.

What this meant for him

As you read Mark's account of Jesus' ministry, you notice that it's punctuated by events that show how great Jesus really is. He miraculously heals a disease; he quiets a raging storm; he feeds thousands of people by miraculously multiplying bread; he gives sight to a blind man. In Mark 9, shortly before where we are reading today, Jesus

is transfigured. For a few moments, his appearance becomes radiant, and God the Father booms, "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him."

It must have seemed to his disciples that Jesus was on the way up in the world, that his plan was to show his power and exert his influence. But that was not his plan. He had other work to do. We heard last week about how Jesus let his disciples in on his mission, telling them what he was going to do shortly. It was darker than the disciples had ever imagined. Now Jesus takes them away from the crowds, off by themselves, and tells them the same thing again. 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. This seemed like nonsense to Jesus' closest followers. Jesus had told them that he was the Christ. The Christ was the great Anointed One of God, the one who was to come into the world to conquer it back for God. Now, when Jesus did amazing miracles he looked the part of the Christ. He looked like the promised Rescuer of the world. He looked like he was on his way to greatness. But being betrayed? Being killed? This didn't fit at all. Being handed over to one's enemies to be killed seemed like the path to failure, not to greatness. The disciples were confused; they didn't understand. But recalling the stiff rebuke Jesus had given Peter not too long before, they were afraid to ask him.

The disciples were expecting Jesus to become greater and greater. And they were expecting him to do it in a conventional way. But Jesus was out to blaze a new path to greatness. It was not raw power that would make him great. It was not huge crowds. It was his love that would make him great. Christ's love would lead him to do something that may, at first glance, seem like nonsense to us, too. He would appear to be the lowest of the low. He would leave his throne and be born in a stable. He would gather around him common folk, real people, people with faults and problems, not the kind of people that the world thought highly of. Then, as he predicted (and as the Scriptures had predicted for centuries), he would be handed over to his enemies. Can you fathom that—the one who created and controls all things letting himself be controlled by those he created! And he would allow them to kill him.

Why would Jesus do all this? Why would he let himself be brought so low? For you and me. For all of us in the world. We are the ones who should be brought low. We are altogether sinful from birth. Not only that, but we have in countless ways sinned against God. And that's nothing to shrug off. God hates sin and the people who sin. By rights we should be the ones rejected by him and killed. But thanks to Jesus, that will not be our lot. For God loves us. Even though we are sinful people, even though we sin each day, he loves us. That's why Jesus, the Son of God, came into the world. He loved us and traded places with us. He let himself be brought low. He was rejected, and not only by men. He took all the blame for our sins and suffered the worst pain imaginable; he let himself be rejected by God his Father. It should have been you and I suffering that fate, sinking into hell, but Jesus did it for us. Then he came back to life, and now he lives to love us. He forgives us for being the sinners that we are and for doing the sins that we do. He has lifted us up from hell itself and given us a new life and new status: we are children of God and heirs of life.

That love that led Jesus to the cross for us—that's what makes him so great. "Greater love has no one than this, than that he lay down his life for his friends." Jesus did.

Christ redefined the path to greatness. What did this mean for him? It meant taking the blame for the sins of the world and letting himself be considered the worst criminal. It meant dying, moved by love for us. It meant rising and giving life to us all.

What this means for us

This redefinition of the path to greatness had implications for Jesus' followers, too. Of course, they had a hard time grasping that. They didn't get how Jesus was going to be great, and they didn't get how they were going to be great either.

This comes out in an embarrassing little incident. Jesus is walking along, leading his disciples to their home base in Capernaum. The men are squabbling, probably under their breath, along the road. Jesus lets it go until they get to the city. Then he asks them, "What were you arguing about on the road?" Busted! But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. It's like a parent catching kids arguing about something he just told them to stop talking about. "What were you kids just fighting about?" "Um, nothing," they say with their heads bowed.

Amazing! Jesus has just told his followers of how he was going to humble himself to save them, and they're busy arguing about who's the greatest! Unbelievable, isn't it?

Maybe not. From kids fighting over who gets to be first in line, to teenagers fighting for popularity, to students cheating on exams and papers to get an edge, to grownups politicking and conniving for promotions, it's in our sinful nature to say, "Me first!" Artist Salvador Dali once said, "At age six I wanted to be a cook. At seven I wanted to be Napoleon. And my ambition has been growing steadily ever since." An exaggeration? Probably. But not by much. We know it's true. We like to be better than other people.

Here's one more reason to love Jesus. He doesn't roll his eyes and wave his hand and get rid of us forever. He forgives our slowness to understand God's ways and our eagerness to adopt the world's ways. He forgives us and gives us a new mind, a new outlook. He forms us to think the way that he thinks. Listen: 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."

Then, so that we understand his point, Jesus does a little object lesson. You know—the preacher takes some common object and bases a message on it. That's what Jesus does here. 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." He takes a little child and stands him up in front of the disciples. And he says that welcoming a little child is a perfect example of how to serve God. (By "welcoming" he means more than just saying "Hi" to a little kid. He means reaching out to them and helping them.)

What's the point of his illustration? Let me put it this way. Have you ever changed a diaper? "Too many to count!" some of you are thinking. Well, what if you had the baby up on the changing table, you finished the diaper change and then you said, "Okay, kid. That will be \$.25 for the diaper, \$.05 for the diaper wipes, \$3.00 for labor, plus handling fee, hazardous material disposal fee... Your total is \$5.25. Pay up!" How much do you think you'd get out of the baby? Nothing is my guess. Babies can't pay you back for what you do to them. Little children don't repay all the things that have been done for

them. So why serve them? Because we love them. Because we care about them. Not because we think we can get something out of the deal. We serve out of love.

Isn't that the way Jesus deals with us? Did Jesus go to the cross saying, "You all are gonna owe me big, and I expect to be paid back in full"? Not at all. He went to the cross because he loved you and me and everybody. He knew that we wouldn't repay him—indeed, that we *couldn't* repay him. He knew that we would never "earn" his sacrifice. But he gave his life for us, "never grudging for the lost ones that tremendous sacrifice."

That's what Jesus calls on us to do for the people around us. To reach out and, moved by selfless love, the kind of love he has already freely given to us, to serve and to help. To serve not thinking, "What's in this for me?" but rather, "What's in this for the person who needs my help?" To serve not thinking, "What am I going to get out of this?" but rather, "What can I give?"

And there's a twist in this model of service. Jesus says that when we serve not driven by a reward, when we give selflessly, he considers that a personal favor. When we help a little child who can't repay us, Jesus loves that. He considers that favor one done for him! And any service to Jesus is really service to God the Father. Isn't that amazing? By serving the lowest person on earth, we are actually serving the Greatest One in the universe.

We said before that Jesus wanted his love to define him. He wanted to be the one who loved the deepest, the one whose love led him to make an incomparable sacrifice. That is also what Christ wants of us. He wants love to define us. He wants us to be great not by pushing other people around, not by putting them down, but by sacrificing in order to lift them up. And with him living within us—him, the one who let himself be considered lowest of the low to lift us up to be God's own children—with him living in us, that is what we will do.

Will Arnold Schwarzenegger redefine the path to greatness, show us that an actor/businessman with no political experience makes for a great governor? He may; time will tell. Jesus Christ, on the other hand, has blazed a path to true greatness, for he gave his life for us. He let himself be brought low, to suffer hell, so that we might be lifted up. And we are lifted up, called children of God and heirs of glory. As such, let's not try to make ourselves look great in the world's way. Let us instead go by Christ's definition of greatness and sacrifice and serve. Amen.