

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon Text: Mark 9:30-37

Related text: James 3:13-4:10

Date preached September 23, 2012

Grace to you and peace from God our Father, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Who is the greatest? The disciples were arguing about who was the greatest. Such a question is a popular one to ask in the context of history. Who was the greatest President? Who is the greatest Baseball player? Who is the greatest football coach?

We are not given specifics about what their parameters were for measuring greatness. However, we do have a lot of parameters when we make our own judgments about greatness.

Greatness is usually measured by some form of statistical formula. Greatness can be attributed to the size of an organization. Greatness can be measured by ones achievements.

One of the things about greatness is that we also equate that in many cases with success. At times success comes quickly. At other times success is achieved over a long period of time. That can be frustrating when we are impatient for that success to come. And then there is a

measure of success that does not equate to what we seek in this life.

That is what Jesus talks about to the disciples as he holds before them a child. “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.”

Now this child was not great. This child was not the star Galilean soccer team. His face is not etched in papyrus for running the fastest track time. Children in Biblical times were thought of for their potential, the expectations that boys would take over the family business and girls would learn the basics of homemaking.

In lifting up this child, Jesus is pointing to something that is far greater. He is talking about a quality that is significant, but in our society is very much undervalued. Jesus links greatness with humility.

Consider humility as a gift of the Holy Spirit to keep us bonded to God. In such circumstances, the Holy Spirit properly reveals to us that a humble life is one that is in obedience to the First Commandment.

There we hear the Word of the Lord. “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.”

One who is humble does not seek their own self-interest. That is why it is so hard for us to recognize the value of humility. We are raised to achieve all that we can and such achievements come at a cost. The cost is our very soul, were it not for Christ.

Jesus placed himself in perfect obedience to our Heavenly Father. Such humility led him to the cross. Jesus was killed. His humble obedience appeared to let evil have the day. Yet that is the wonder of the Gospel. The Gospel is that the one who deserves the highest exaltation is the one who took his own advice. He humbled himself. He laid down his life for the sake of our eternal living.

That for us is a paradox. Greatness is not measured by our own achievement but in the achievement of Christ. Thus, the avenue for glory is the path of humility. The promise of this paradox comes from God. As James states it, “Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.”

One who is humble seeks the presence of God. The humble one sees the wisdom of God's Word that comes in both law and gospel.

So, as we look at the reading from James, not simply today but over the past several weeks, we see it as an epistle of common sense. We see the benefit of humility.

Humility draws us closer to God. In being drawn to God we discover many things. We discover patience in the midst of our struggles; that is to believe that Christ will raise up the lowly as he promised.

From Isaiah 66:2, the Lord seeks "...the humble and contrite spirit, who trembles at my word." Furthermore the prophet Isaiah also writes, "For the Lord will revive the spirit of the humble and revive the heart of the contrite." Isaiah 57:15.

From First Peter 5:5-6 we see the hope that carries us beyond this day. "In the same way, you who are younger must accept the authority of the elders. And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time."