

SERVANTS OF ALL

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Mark 9:30-37

My wife and I have a daughter and she is now nineteen years old and off at college. She is a fine person but I do remember that when she was born and for some time after that she was... rather useless. Sure, she was cute, but all she did was eat and sleep and cry and soil mountains of diapers. My wife and I had to do everything for her. It was incredibly inconvenient. And it was exhausting. I don't think there was a single night that I didn't have to wake my wife to tell her that the baby was crying.

We had a dog at the time and the dog was much more useful than the baby. The baby would throw food on the floor and it was the dog that would clean it up. The dog didn't need diapers; he just went out into the yard. The baby would be lying on the floor and I would say (whistle), "Let's go," and the baby wouldn't move, but the dog would run to me. I can't remember all the times I looked at that kid and asked, "When are you going to get a job?" I'm still asking that question. Children are wonderful, but let's be realistic, they are a drag on productivity.

We read about children today in the Gospel of Mark. In this chapter, Jesus spends most of his time teaching his disciples about the requirements of discipleship. What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus? Mark continually portrays the disciples as being low on the comprehension scale. They usually didn't get it. They can't seem to grasp what Jesus is telling them. This particular section of Mark begins back in chapter 8 with the story of Jesus healing a blind man. Jesus and his entourage are in the town of Bethsaida and this blind man is brought to Jesus. The people ask if he can heal their friend. Jesus places saliva in the man's eyes and says, *Can you see anything?* The man responds saying, *I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.* Jesus lays his hands on the man's eyes for a second time and finally the man's sight is fully restored. Mark uses this incident as a metaphor for the disciples who can only partly see who Jesus truly is.

In our reading for today, Jesus tells his disciples for the second time about his ultimate fate. *The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.* However, in their continuing half-blindness, the disciples still do not understand and they are too afraid to ask any follow-up questions. Jesus' betrayal and death and resurrection is beyond their comprehension.

In the second part of our reading, the group arrives in Capernaum, the village that is Jesus' home-base during his Galilean ministry. In Capernaum they enter a house and once in private Jesus asks them what they had been arguing about while

on the road. Apparently, there had been this heated discussion among the group as they traveled. When Jesus interrogates them, the disciples invoke their right to remain silent and say nothing. In truth, they had been arguing. They had been arguing about which one of them was the greatest.

To us, this seems rather silly. How does one qualify to be the greatest disciple of Jesus? What is the standard of measurement? Is it holiness? Is one holier than the rest? Is it being able to perform the greatest miracles? "Feed 5000? I can feed 10,000!" Is it just one thing that makes you great or is it a string of events like the decathlon in the Olympics? "He excelled in the prayer marathon and would have won the gold if he hadn't fallen down in the humility hurdles." Is the greatest disciple the one with the most Facebook friends or Twitter followers?

So, in the house, Jesus sits them all down for a chat, and he explains to them about discipleship. *Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and a servant of all.* Well, that changes everything. I thought that if you want to be first, you should strive to be the best, the most, the biggest, the loudest, the most conspicuous. But now Jesus is saying that to be first you've got to be last, to be first you've got to be a servant. That doesn't make sense. I'm beginning to see why the disciples had trouble with this.

But Jesus is not talking about our world. Jesus is preaching about the kingdom of God and the kingdom operates with rules different than the realm of earth. In the kingdom, the emphasis is not on power but service, not on competition but love. Loving God and loving neighbor is the currency of the kingdom. These are the ways of God.

To make his point, Jesus takes a small child into his arms and he says to the disciples, *Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.*

We love our children. I love my daughter. But, as I mentioned earlier, for the first couple of years, they aren't really good for much. If you want to make it big in this world, to be a success, to be great, then a child is not going to be much help to you. Children require being taken care of. They require being served. There's not much immediate return on your investment.

If I want to become the greatest preacher, then I need to study with the preaching professors at Vanderbilt. I'm certainly not going to seek advice from a kid in diapers. They can't help me. An infant won't put you on the road to success. They won't make you rich or famous. They just make you broke and tired. And that is what Jesus is saying to the disciples. Greatness in God's kingdom is measured on a different scale. When you can accept and celebrate the helplessness and vulnerability of a child, then you can see the Christ. If you want to be first in God's

kingdom, you must set aside your concept of greatness and accept being the least. One must learn to be servant.

This word servant in the Greek is *diakanos*. Think of it as describing a waiter—someone who serves and brings food, who sees to the needs of others. Greatness in God's kingdom goes to those who put others before themselves.

As I reflected on this passage this week, one person kept coming to my mind. Her name was Sue Ann. She died this summer from leukemia. I first met Sue Ann about twenty years ago. She was a member of a church I served. She was a lifelong Presbyterian and a church elder. I remember early on asking her what she did and she told me that she worked for the state (Tennessee). And she left it at that. Sometime later, I asked what she did with the state and she told me she worked for the Department of Labor. And she left it at that. Since I wasn't getting any details from Sue Ann, I started asking around. What I learned was that she didn't work for the Department of Labor, she was the Department of Labor. She was an Assistant Commissioner in the department. Although Sue Ann was one of the most powerful people in state government, you would never know it. She was smart and kind and caring and generous and humble. She always smiled and when you were around she made a point of making you feel special.

Her daughter told me that although Sue Ann had once risen to the position of assistant commissioner, she actually stepped down a bit to be the administrator of the Workers Compensation office. That was her real joy, helping people—ensuring that those Tennesseans who had been injured on the job received what the law entitled them. She was a driving force in this state in protecting the rights of workers.

One of the things that I learned from Sue Ann is that service is an attitude. Jesus says that we must be last of all and servant of all and we think that to serve we have to give up everything and become the least. No. What it means is that we ask the question 'how can I use what I have in service to others?' Sue Ann would probably argue that she didn't do enough. But she did. She used her position to serve, to serve those who often had little power, helping them in their need. She was a servant of all.

It has been my honor to have known many wonderful people who are followers of Christ. They didn't toot their horns or seek acclamations of greatness. They simply serve. They use their gifts to quietly help others. They look at an infant not as a demand but as a child of God. They look at the powerless, the hungry, the broken, the lost and ask "How can I serve?" These are the people who know Christ. These are the people who know God.