

Hayward United Methodist Church

Pastor Samuel's Message for the Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost, September 19, 2021

"Who Was the Greatest?"

Text: Mark 9:30-37

Gospel Reading: Mark 9:33-37 (NRSV)

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such a child in my name welcome me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Prayer for Illumination (UMH 6)

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that, as the Scriptures are read and your word proclaimed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Jesus was almost finishing his ministry in Galilee. Soon he and his disciples would arrive in Jerusalem where Jesus would face the cross. Jesus wanted his disciples to understand what he would accomplish his mission in Jerusalem. Jesus began to talk about his suffering. It was hard for the disciples even to imagine the suffering Messiah. Most of his disciples knew that he was the Messiah. Probably they thought that he would declare himself as the Messiah in Jerusalem and claim the throne of David.

Jesus had to teach the disciples about his suffering. The crowd understood Jesus to be a miracle worker. For the crowd Jesus was a supernatural figure. Jesus indirectly referred to himself as the Son of Man who would suffer and be rejected. But on the third day he would come back to life. Suffering comes first and vindication comes second. Will the disciples understand this concept?

First, Jesus asked the disciples what they were arguing about on the way. The disciples believed that they got a great teacher. In fact they became the disciples of the Messiah. It was a great honor to be the disciples of the Messiah, the King of the Jews. They were privileged to be chosen as the twelve. Jesus was even talking about the Kingdom of God. He preached the Kingdom of God. The disciples wanted to occupy some great positions in the Kingdom of God. This was the time to grab the power among them. There had to be some kind of rank among them. They did not want to be equal.

When Jesus called the disciples, he called them individually. He treated all of them equal. He did not promise that they would occupy a special place in the Kingdom of God. He sent the disciples on a mission to preach, teach, and heal. Even he rebuked Peter for his misunderstanding of the Messiah. He put all the disciples to work. They were wandering with Jesus throughout Galilee. He taught all the disciples together and taught them in private. He rebuked the disciples for lack of faith. This shows that Jesus did not put someone over above the others.

But the disciples wanted a place of honor. So they had the opportunity to argue among themselves who was the greatest. Not every time all the disciples were together. Only on few occasions the Gospel writers mention the twelve together. This was one of the occasions. All twelve disciples were walking with Jesus. Jesus appeared to be not listening to their conversation. One after another began to argue that he was the greatest. Probably Peter argued that he was the greatest. Earlier Peter confessed that Jesus was the Messiah. So he thought that he was the greatest as he got a special revelation. Among all the disciples Matthew was highly educated. He was a tax collector and he worked for the Roman government. He knew both Hebrew and Greek. Probably he told others that he was the greatest. Who else could be? Judas? Judas was known to the Jewish authorities. He could be the greatest.

Jesus remained silent. He could have said something. But he chose to wait and teach them about greatness later. The disciples did not get it what Jesus taught earlier. He said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and for those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it" (Mk 8:34-35). Discipleship is all about taking up the cross and following Jesus. That means the disciples had to sacrifice the place of honor and

become servants of all. Did the disciples understand this? Probably the disciples did not get it. They still believed that they would get some special treatment in the Kingdom of God. Jesus would make them rulers over the people. In Mark's Gospel the disciples very often misunderstand the teachings of Jesus rather than understand his teachings. How do you understand the concept of discipleship? What does it take to remain as a disciple of Jesus?

Second, Jesus used an object lesson to teach greatness. Jesus was waiting for the opportunity to teach about greatness. When he asked the disciples what they were arguing about on the way, they were silent. Why silent? Why not say what they were talking about? They were hesitant to bring it to public. Probably they knew that Jesus would not appreciate it. Probably Jesus would say something different. So they did not want to draw Jesus into conversation in the first place. Jesus was persistent to teach the disciples.

The argument of the disciples provided an opportunity for teaching moment. Jesus knows what we are arguing about. Jesus knows what we are thinking. Jesus knows what we are going through. We can not hide from Jesus. When Jesus asks us about what we are saying, we should be honest to tell Jesus. Otherwise Jesus would find out. This is what happened exactly to the disciples. Jesus found out that the disciples were arguing about greatness. They wanted to be special in the Kingdom of God.

Jesus said to the disciples, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all" (Mk 9:35). Jesus reverses the worldly understanding of greatness. In the eyes of the world greatness is measured by success, power, and hierarchy. The disciples saw it in their context. They saw people in power in the Roman government. Some people had a special treatment. Some were very rich. Some were successful in their carrier. The disciples lost everything when they began to follow Jesus. Now the disciples wanted to get back what they lost. They wanted fame and wealth. So that they could be powerful in the Kingdom of God. They thought that Jesus would provide all the worldly power.

Jesus did not stop with his teaching on greatness. He made it clear that greatness is achieved only by service. Jesus himself came to serve and give his life as a ransom for many. In the Kingdom of God things could be different. The first will be the last and the last will be the first. That is how the Kingdom of God operates.

It is the reality set by God. The poor and the sinners are welcome to the Kingdom of God. Jesus came to seek the lost and the least. He invited the sinners and the tax collectors to the Kingdom of God. Everyone will have an equal place in the Kingdom of God. There should not be any argument as to who would be the greatest. Even the Son of God became a suffering servant.

We are all familiar with the object lessons. Object lessons are primarily used to teach the kids. Object lessons are powerful and they convey a powerful message. Object lessons are straight forward. Jesus was a great teacher. He was a gardener too. He used garden image to teach the crowd. Here Jesus took a little child and put the child in the midst of the disciples and then he took the child in his arms and said, “Whoever welcomes one such a child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me” (Mk 9:37).

Jesus brought a child as an example of greatness. No one would have thought about a child. Because child is a symbol of powerlessness and dependency. A child would depend upon their parents. A child can not do mighty things. In the eyes of the world who would welcome a child? Only those who are powerful and rich are always welcome. The child does not bring power and rich. Again, Jesus reverses the expectations of the world. In the Kingdom of God, those who depend on God and those who are powerless are welcome.

In order to enter into the Kingdom of God, in order to become a disciple of Jesus, one should look at a child first. The Kingdom of God belongs to those who represent a child. Those who want to follow Jesus must depend on Jesus. It is not to become great in following Jesus, but it is to become like a child. It is to depend on God’s grace for life in the Kingdom of God. What are you looking for in following Jesus? Jesus became a servant of all. So also we should serve one another in love.

God Bless.

Pastor Samuel

Let’s say the Benediction together:

**The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,
and the love of God,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit
be with us all. Amen.**