

The Way of Discipleship: Service

Trinity CRC, March 4, 2018 AM

Lent Series: Discipleship Part 3 w/ Pastor Michael

Mark 9 (vv.30-37)

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Friends in Christ,

If I ask you, “Who is the greatest person in the church?” what would you say? I would like to say to each of you, “You are! You are the greatest person in the church!” I would like you to feel really good about yourself and walk out of here feeling positive about yourself. Well, that’s not exactly true. I certainly don’t want to stomp on your dignity and make you feel like trash. And I do want you to know that you are very valuable in the kingdom of God. However, our Bible reading helps us see how greatness is measured in God’s kingdom. And it’s different than in our world.

I googled “the greatest people in Edmonton.” A 2016 list included people in Edmonton but also from other parts of Canada. In any event, there is—as you would expect—our current male hockey star Connor McDavid, as well as female hockey star, now hockey-commentator Cassie Campbell. Also included is the owner of the Oilers, Daryl Katz, and news-talk radio host Ryan Jespersen. The list included our provincial finance minister Joe Ceci and Conservative MLA turned NDP Sandra Jansen. The list included indigenous actress and pageant winner Ashley Callingham-Burnham. Brian Ferguson the CEO of Cenovus Energy is on the list and so is Fort MacMurray’s fire chief Darby Allen who led during the forest fire they called The Beast. There are people on that list who you would agree are great and some you might think are not worthy of such an honour.

Now, if we asked the disciples who the greatest person in the church is, would their answer surprise you? Interestingly, that’s the exact thing they were talking about behind Jesus’ back in our Bible reading. Clearly, they weren’t getting what Jesus was teaching them. They weren’t following what their rabbi, teacher or master was telling them in word and showing them in deed.

Jesus Our Rabbi

You see, Jesus is our Rabbi. Congregation, as we consider the theme of discipleship during the weeks of lent, we need to focus on what disciples do. And the very first thing a disciple does is follow the rabbi. So we follow Jesus, our master, teacher or rabbi.

But following isn’t natural for us. We could say the disciples were thick-headed and slow to learn. But when we see them getting side-tracked from their master’s agenda, we should probably clue in that **we** are likely not too much different. Our natural inclination in most things is like the disciples—to think too highly of ourselves. Maybe it’s not true for you but it does happen. Just like the disciples, we get into discussions—maybe even heated debates—in which we try to convince others that we are better than they are. We believe, in some sense at least, that we are the greatest. It’s easy to do. It happens very naturally for us as human beings who are born with a sinful heart.

When it comes to our Bible reading, these 12 disciples have been following Jesus for the past 3 or so years. They've seen Jesus do all kinds of miracles, even raising the dead! They've been swarmed by crowds who wouldn't leave Jesus alone because they marvelled at his teaching and wanted to see more miracles. That's what we talked about in the children's message. 5000 people who wouldn't stop following Jesus and needed to eat. And Jesus fed them all.

But as we come to our Bible reading, Jesus wants some privacy. That's why it says in v.30,

Mk 9:30 Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, ³¹ because he was teaching his disciples.

Away from the crowds, he continues "teaching his small band of disciples about the suffering and death that God requires of him and about what he requires of them." (NIV Application Comm.) But they don't seem to get what their rabbi is saying, and, we read, "they were afraid to ask him about it." (v.32).

Maybe they are embarrassed about not understanding. Maybe they are in denial about his upcoming crucifixion. They could simply be confused about his words. After all, earlier in his ministry, Jesus often taught in parables and when the disciples didn't get what he was saying, he would take them away from the crowds and teach them what he meant. But this time he's just telling them straight up what is going to happen. Perhaps they are looking for a deeper meaning in what he's teaching.

And that's likely because the disciples simply didn't have any room in their thinking for Jesus to die. If he was to be the Messiah they were expecting and which generations of people before them had been expecting, then they were looking for a conquering king! Not a suffering servant.

They were prepared to follow a strong leader who gave them victory over Rome. They felt like they were perhaps following in the footsteps of their ancestors who waited 400 years for God to rescue them from Egyptian bondage. They wanted a new Moses. And Jesus seems to be the guy who could break them out from under Roman oppression.

But that's not the kind of rabbi Jesus is. He's leading his disciples where they need to go, not where they want to go. He knows their need better than they do because he is God. Jesus brings his 12 disciples to see their own sinfulness when he asks them, "What were you guys arguing about on the road?" (v.33). He knew very well. Yes, he knew they were arguing about who was greatest or best disciple (v.34). These grown men who had been taught by Rabbi Jesus should not have been thinking about themselves anymore.

But sin dies pretty hard in us, doesn't it? Sin rears its ugly head all of the time. I had it AGAIN myself the other day. I got frustrated trying to get help for someone. The receptionist on the phone was making it more difficult than I thought it needed to be for me to make an appointment for someone. I got a little irritated with her. Later, I reflected on it; I wondered if maybe pride made me get angry.

Maybe I thought my time was worth more than hers. Or didn't she hear me say I'm a pastor trying to help someone? Did I think I was greater than her? The disciples were arguing about who is the greatest. Do you ever do that in some way?

The disciples are thinking about worldly status and are completely oblivious to how God measures our status. They don't get that their rabbi is going to die for their sins in order to give them right standing—status—with God in heaven. They don't like the idea of Jesus having to suffer and die for sin. They don't see sin as their biggest problem. Rome's oppression was bad, but not their own sin. The 12 followed their rabbi, thinking that when he was ruler of Israel and Rome's oppressive hand was gone, then they would be like Jesus' co-regents, the second in command perhaps.

I like this statement: "If we are thinking that by following Jesus we will enhance our own prestige, our sense of self-worth (so highly prized today, but so easily leading to a narcissistic sense that the gospel exists to make us feel good about ourselves), or [if we are thinking that by following Jesus we will enhance] even our bank balance, then we're very unlikely to be able to hear what God is actually saying. Certainly, Jesus must have been frustrated and disappointed that the disciples could only worry about their own relative status. That's the trouble with understanding half the message—the half they wanted to understand: (believing that) if Jesus is Messiah, then we are royal courtiers-in-waiting!" (Wright)

Any talk of Jesus having to suffer and die for sinners wasn't registering in the brains of the disciples. Jesus' message came across to them like our Olympic gold medalists, Tessa Virtue and Scott Moir, saying that they were going for the gold in ice dancing while their arms and legs are tied up with ropes. That's impossible. The disciples simply couldn't hear what their rabbi was teaching them because they had not grasped the seriousness of sin. Their own sin included. They could not hear Jesus saying that they needed more than a rabbi who might lead them into some great earthly kingdom where they might be great. But they did need more. They needed a Saviour.

Jesus Our Saviour

And we need a Saviour. We need Jesus!

Jesus tells the disciples,

Jn 9:31 ... "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."

Those words echo what Mark wrote in chapter 8:31, Jesus' first prophesy of his death and resurrection. That time Peter rebuked him, saying, "That will never happen to you, Lord!" But our loving Lord Jesus is patient and persistent with his thick-headed disciples. It's like he's saying, "Let me tell you again what I told you a few days ago as well. I know this is hard for you to understand but it must happen."

The term *Son of Man* can have other meanings. But here it is Jesus' way of reminding them that he is one of us. He's the perfect human, who alone can satisfy

the debt of our sin. And that debt must be paid and will be paid as Jesus is betrayed. And it's interesting to me that he doesn't just say he will be betrayed but someone is going to betray him into the hand of men who will beat, falsely accuse and sentence him to death. Sometimes there is this clear sense in the gospels that Jesus is willingly going to the cross. And he is. But here he lovingly instructs the disciples. They don't know it yet, but they will in time. Judas will betray him, and the others will deny and abandon him. Then he will suffer and die for them. Yes, die for them. And for you and me! Oh, the heaviness in his voice is building as he realizes that the time is coming closer. And as he sees the dullness of the disciples, he must increasingly come to realize that his disciples will betray him and he will indeed be alone through the grueling journey to the cross.

However, the cross will not have the last word. For Jesus says he will rise again on the third day. His resurrection marks the victory over sin. It is his resurrection that removes the blinders from his disciples' minds finally. Like the men on the road to Emmaus on Easter evening, their eyes were open to see Jesus for who he really was: the Saviour from sin rather than from Rome. The one to break our bondage to sinful pride and self-seeking glory.

Timothy Keller writes, Jesus is saying, "Yes, I'm the Messiah, the King, but I came not to live but to die. I'm not here to take power but to lose it; I'm here not to rule but to serve. And that's how I'm going to defeat evil and put everything right." And so he did. So he did.

Jesus Our Servant

Jesus is our Rabbi and our Saviour. He is also our Servant. As he told his disciples, the way of the kingdom of God is not in seeking your own greatness. It is in becoming a servant. If you read Isaiah 53 sometime, you hear about all the suffering our Lord Jesus endured for our salvation. And do you know what that chapter is sometimes called? *The Servant Song*. No servant was greater than Jesus who gave up his life for us. So it is only right and fitting that we follow our master in the way of service. We read in v.35,

Mk 9:35 *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."*

And then he took a child—someone considered to be pretty insignificant in their society. And he said, if you welcome or receive this child in my name—because you love me—you welcome me. It has been said that children should be seen and not heard. They are a nuisance the disciples might say. They are not worth my valuable time. But Jesus said that's not so.

Service is the call of the kingdom of God, my friends. We humble ourselves because Jesus has already given us eternal security and glories that far outweigh anything this world has to offer. Christ frees us from chasing our own greatness, whether that's through the corporate totem pole, the classroom, the bank account or anything else. It's not that we should not pursue excellence in our studies or do our best in our work. Of course we should. That honours God who has given us

gifts to use. But never should our success or rise up the ladder make us proud so that we look down on others and think we are better—greater—than they are.

Let me show you a video of a woman who was chasing the dream up the corporate ladder. But God moved her to serve the poor and that's where she found greater fulfillment in her life. A couple of things you'll hear her say include, "Less money, more life." I like that. She's serving needy people, some on the bottom rung of society, like the child that Jesus embraced. And that's where she finds the greatest fulfillment in life. This servant lifestyle has helped her break her hunger for things. She says, "At heart, I'm crazy materialistic and God has helped me trade in some of those things that I once held high" for serving others which enriches her so much more than money ever could. She's got a bit of Texas accent so it might take you a few seconds to start to understand her. Please watch and listen.

Defining Success in Service video

Congregation, those who are Christians should be the best servants in the world. We should be looking for ways to bless others. Serving isn't as hard as we might think. Once we find our place, like the lady in this video, it's a matter of seeing a need that we can fill and then setting out to do it. It's about blessing someone in Jesus' name by our love. And Jesus might help us to see, like this lady, that the things we are stressing about are not as significant as we thought and actually fade away as we walk alongside of others who are in need.

I saw this servant heart in one of the children in the congregation the other day as I scrolled through Facebook. I saw this picture of Emily Schenk. She spent the last two years growing her hair just so she could get it long enough to donate to the cancer society. Her hair will make a wig for someone who lost her hair from chemotherapy. That's service with a smile (you can't see it on this picture but she is smiling)! And I'm certain that Emily feels blessed for doing it.

We serve by giving our money to the Canada Food Grains Bank today as well. In doing so we help those who are hungry due to disaster and conflict in their part of the world. Some here serve by doing income tax returns for those who don't make a lot of money. Some serve by praying for one another and our community and world. Some serve in the church ministries and leadership. Some serve in the community at large, at places like the Mosaic Centre, Mustard Seed, driving people to appointments at the hospital, or visiting shut-ins. Some host tournaments or other fun events as fundraisers for good causes. Listen to what God puts on your heart and act on it.

In serving we all find that our joy in the Lord increases. We might have to give up time or money to serve others but Jesus more than makes up for it in the way he fills our lives with more life—true joy, peace, love and deeper meaning.

So let me end by asking you now, who is the greatest person in your life? Yes, Jesus is a good answer. But a close second could be a little child or someone else that you serve in Jesus' name. Amen.