

“THE GREATEST IS THE SERVANT”

Text: Mark 9:30-37

As Jesus and His disciples travel to Capernaum, Jesus is teaching them along the way about the cross. That “the Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise.” And He is teaching them that not because that is part of what the Christian faith and life is all about, or even the most important part... but because that is the Christian faith and life. Without the cross and empty tomb of Jesus, Christianity is meaningless.

And so all Christian teaching finds its beginning and its ending in the cross of Christ. And if there's any teaching that doesn't, it isn't Christian, and it's not of God. Because it's on the cross where the power of God, the greatness of God, the glory of God, and love of God, are shown to us. Because there God is for us. His power, greatness, glory, and love made perfect in weakness.

Now, that is not how we are used to seeing or thinking about power and greatness, and so we need to be taught. We need this truth implanted into our hearts. Mere knowledge is not enough, because faith and life are not just of the mind, but of the heart. We often know what we should do, but don't do it! We need a change of heart, so that what we know in our minds might be reflected in our lives.

Jesus is teaching/catechizing His disciples. And they needed this teaching, because on the way, even as they are hearing one thing from Jesus, they're arguing among themselves about Who is the greatest! They all wanted to be, but by the world's measure of greatness. They didn't understand true greatness. That is what Jesus was trying to teach them.

And so Jesus gives them an illustration. He brings a child before them and says: serving this child is true greatness. Now this is certainly not the greatness of the world, where parenting is often considered secondary to careers. Serving children is not a path to worldly gain. It is a labor of love and a reflection of what Jesus has done for us. He was talking about himself. Because no matter how hard you try - you can't do this on our own. IN FACT, even trying to be last and servant of all, you'd be doing it in order to be first and great and so you've failed even before you get started!

No, there's only one who could do this: the One who is first and so doesn't need to worry about getting there. The One who is over all, and so doesn't need to worry about himself. That One, then, came and did this for you who could not do it. He became the last, the lowest of the low by bearing the sin of all the world, of all people, of all of you, on the cross. He became the last, the servant of all by taking the wrath and punishment and condemnation for all those sins and dying for them. Jesus took our place so that we could have His place. He did it to make you first. To make you a child of God. To give you the kingdom of heaven and the promise of eternal life.

So Jesus is the answer to the disciple's argument! The greatest one was standing right in their midst, serving them as a labor of love. He's the Son of God who made Himself the least of all and the servant of all serving the least, the lowest, the outcast, the sinner, and those twelve who were arguing that day about who was the greatest. Who came in humility and compassion to us helpless children, and giving His life that we might have life.

And so Jesus teaches them about the cross, because that's how He's come to serve you. The cross is not part of His service for you; it is His service for you. It is not just the unhappy ending of the story; it is the story. It is why He is born, it is why He lives. All His words and work and life lead to the cross... that in His death is our life.

And in His death is our life, because on the cross Jesus makes atonement for our life-stealing sins. On the cross He dies the death we deserve. On the cross He reconciles us to His Father. How do

we know? Because after three days He did rise from the dead. His resurrection is the proof. Because where there is no more sin there is no more death. And where there is no more sin, then that which separated us from God is gone, and we are reconciled. And if sin and death and our separation from God are taken care of, then our life has been restored.

The disciples didn't understand this, and they were afraid to ask. Their minds were centered on greatness, not the cross. To them, the two were opposites. But to Jesus, the two are the same.

And so we too need to be taught/catechized, that we might learn to see this greatness, this oneness. We need to be catechized by the cross. We need the cross implanted in our hearts. We need the cross to put to death our old way of thinking, our old way of living, our old ways... period. That we might live a new life as a child again. A child of God.

Maybe your childhood was not a happy one, and maybe your childhood was stolen from you too soon. But your heavenly Father wants to give this life back to you. To restore what was either taken from you, or that you left behind, or never had at all. To be a child that isn't worried about who is the greatest is, but is just a kid. Who doesn't worry about the bills, or the budget, or the strange noises at night, because we have a Father who's greater than all those things and has promised to provide. A child who enjoys the wonders of creation, not for what we can get out of them, but simply because they're the wonders of creation. Wouldn't it be great to have such care-free days? To be born again?

That's the life that your Heavenly Father wants for you; the life the Son of God came to provide for you; and the life the Holy Spirit is here to give to you. Life as a child. A child of God. That through the cross of Christ the old you be can put to death, and a new you can be born again.

And so that's what happens here, where Jesus and His cross are right in the midst of you, here for you. In the waters of Holy Baptism the old you is drowned and dies, and a new you is raised and born again. In Holy Absolution all the sins and doubts and fears that haunt you are chased away by His loving embrace and the tender words of His love: I forgive you all your sins. And that in Holy Communion, we come and eat and drink the fruits of the cross that give us life - Jesus' own body and blood. The food of the new creation. The food of those born again to a new life. The food which nourishes and strengthens us to live as children of God.

That is the greatness that has been given to you. That can't be earned, only given. And that Jesus now invites you to live. To be who you are. To live as His child. Not worrying about tomorrow, not worrying about greatness, but living in His love and giving His love.

It's that easy, and it's that hard. Hard, because the wisdom and ways of the world have been so ingrained in us. The striving for greatness, for recognition, for power, for glory. The striving of ourselves and others that robs us of joy and life. That's why we need to be catechized - all our lives. The catechism isn't just for children, but to make us children! That we learn of the cross and have it implanted into our hearts, that Christ may grow in us and we in Him. That we live always as children of God, in the safety of His house, and in the security of His forgiveness and love. And so be great. Because there is nothing greater than to be a child - a child of God... and so you are! Thus the world's ideas of greatness don't really matter, do they? But that cup of cold water you gave, that helping hand, those forgiving words, that comforting embrace, that meaningful time, why'd you do that? To be great? No. But because you are great. In Christ. In the Name of Jesus, Amen.