

Sermon Manuscript: Mark 9:30-37

The Servant of All

18th Sunday after Pentecost – September 26, 2021

They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, because he was teaching his disciples. He said to them, "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." But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.

They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?" But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.

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."

He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me." [NIV]

If you're as old as I am you remember getting worksheets and other papers in school that were printed on a spirit duplicator or mimeograph. The ink was usually blue or, sometimes black. When I first started as a pastor in 1987 we still printed our Sunday church bulletins with a mimeograph. Not too much later we began using a copy machine. We were shopping around for the best one. I remember talking to a copier man who gave us the straight story about copiers. He said that the inner machinery of all photocopiers was made by one of two or three manufacturers. So basically all copiers were the same. It didn't really matter which brand you purchased. The important thing was the company that sold you the machine. How good were they at customer service? How quickly do they respond when you have a breakdown? Do they have parts on hand? Do they fix the machine right the first time?

This same thing is true for many of the things we buy. You might be a true-blue Ford or Chevy or Dodge fan but modern cars and trucks are all basically the same with many of the parts made by the same manufacturers. But what kind of service do you get from the dealer? We live in a service-oriented world. We pay for and expect good service.

Today Jesus teaches us about service as we live our life in the Word. He talks about being **THE SERVANT OF ALL**. What kind of service do we expect from him? What kind of service does he expect from us?

1. This Is What Jesus Is

Last week Jesus showed us who he is. He asked his disciples who they thought he was. Peter had responded with the resounding confession, "*You are the Christ!*" [Mark 8:29] In response to that confession, Jesus began to explain to his disciples what his purpose was. He would have to suffer and die so that he could be the Savior of the world and fulfill his mission as the Christ. Mark recorded that Jesus spoke about this "plainly" to his disciples. In our lesson today, Jesus repeats the same instruction to his disciples. There are two incidents recorded in Mark's gospel that take place between our lesson from last week and what we read today. The first of these was that Jesus was transfigured before Peter, James and John. He appeared to them in his full glory as God. Moses and Elijah had come to

discuss what was soon going to take place in Jerusalem. After they came down from the mountain they met a large crowd that had gathered around a man who brought his son to be healed by Jesus. The boy was possessed by a demon that the other disciples were unable to drive out. Jesus casts out the demon and reminds his disciples that the power to do so comes from him as true God. Both of these incidents demonstrate the authority and power of Jesus as God.

After this Jesus once again explains to his disciples how he will be betrayed and killed. We read here that the disciples *“Did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.”* [verse 32] We cannot help but ask why they didn’t understand. In this very short time between these two lessons we read how Jesus has plainly and carefully explained it to them. And yet they didn’t get it. Why?

One way to think about it is to understand that the disciples were consumers very much like us. They were consumers of what we might call “God stuff.” They had been witnesses to many of the divine things that Jesus had done including his Transfiguration and his power over demons as they had just seen. They had seen many other miracles. They had heard him speak and teach with great power and authority – with the voice of God. If Jesus was who they confessed him to be, he deserved to be worshiped and praised. He deserves to be in a position of power and glory. As his disciples they would be by his side and they hoped to share in the glory as well. They saw Jesus as someone who should be served. When Jesus talked about suffering and death, they simply could not wrap their heads around it.

They looked at Jesus and they saw a source of power that would provide for them and serve them. This was the “God stuff” that they expected to receive. Their thinking went like this: “We are friends and followers of Jesus. Jesus is God. He can provide us with what we want.” We have seen the same logic on the part of the crowd after the feeding of the 5000.

Consumers of “God stuff” look at their religion as if they are God’s customers. They think of their relationship with the almighty Creator as a sort of business transaction. Such a one comes to God as a customer expecting him to give what they want. God may ask a price or demand certain behavior. But this is part of the transaction. The customer pays for the service and then God, as the service provider, provides that service. On those occasions when God does not provide the service we expect, such religious consumers are dissatisfied. After all, the customer is always right! This is the kind of religion that natural, sinful human beings fall into.

Think of all of the religions of the world. Think of what often passes even for Christianity. Human religion has developed many different systems of payment so that they can demand service from their gods. If we follow the right rituals or say the right words or pay the required “dues,” then God owes us his services. Such false religion promises service but it only ends up being do it yourself. They are an attempt to use human activity to force God to provide his services.

The reason the disciples could not understand what Jesus was telling them was because they had this kind of religious mindset. As people who live in a very consumer-oriented society, it is very easy for us to fall into this same sort of thinking. Human nature is inclined to believe that our relationship with God is a business transaction in which we do something for him so that he will owe us. This is exactly backwards.

Jesus gives us a better kind of service. It is better first of all because Jesus gives us what we need instead of merely what we want. We do not always know what is best for us. I have a friend who years ago had a problem with a skunk. He decided that he would try and shoot the skunk. But he didn’t have

a gun. So he went to someone that he knew and asked to borrow one. If I were the one lending the gun, and knowing my friend, I said I would want to ask a few more questions. To my knowledge my friend had little to no experience using a gun. It was what he wanted, but it might not have ended well. And another example, we can think of the opioid crisis that has been in the news. Doctors prescribe these narcotics in order to help people manage pain. But after a while people become addicted to the opioids. They want more of them. The right kind of doctor will not give the customer what they want. Instead they will work to give the patient they help that they truly need.

This is what our Savior Jesus does. This was what he was explaining to his disciples. It's what he wants us to understand as well. As God he has the power to give us whatever we want. But like my friend with the gun, getting everything we want may not end well. Jesus knows that what we truly need is what he provided by his suffering and death, as well as his resurrection, that he was talking about to his disciples. Jesus' service to us is the very best service because he fixes the real problem. He repairs and replaces the brokenness of our sin with the perfection he accomplished sacrificing his innocent life for us.

Not only does Jesus provide better service by providing what we truly need, he also provides better service because he provides it to us for free. Our salvation is not a matter of do it yourself. Instead Jesus has done it for us. We are not obligated to some business transaction in which we pay for Jesus' service. Instead it is the free gift of his grace.

It is also better because it is the kind of service that we could never hope to undertake on our own. We cannot do what it takes in order to remove the guilt of our sin or earn eternal life with God. There are certain things that we cannot do for ourselves. Most of us could not do major repairs on our cars. Most of us could not rewire our homes. None of us is qualified to perform surgery on ourselves or on anyone else. Instead we must rely on others to provide these services for us. Jesus alone can provide the service we need so that we are forgiven, made righteous and able to live before God.

Jesus is the servant of all. This is what he is. He has served us as our God who also came to be our Savior. In grateful response for what he has really done as servant to us all, he also calls us to be the servant of all.

2. What He Calls Us to Be

As we have seen, the disciples had a backwards idea of what service was all about. Jesus had not come to be served but to serve and give his life to save us all. The disciples didn't get it. As they made their way to Capernaum after Jesus had driven the demon from the boy, the disciples continued what was an ongoing argument. They thought that Jesus would one day be a great ruler and that they would be the members of his ruling court. Which of them would have the highest position? Who would be the greatest? When they got to Capernaum, Jesus puts them on the spot. *"What were you arguing about on the road?"* [verse 33] Silence was the only response that they could give. They were embarrassed. They were only concerned about their own greatness. Silence can be our only response as well when we think about our greatness. We all like to cast ourselves in the role of being great. This is the way the world looks at things. This is the way our prideful, sinful human nature likes to think. We all like to think that were the most important person in the universe.

Jesus calls us to just the opposite way of thinking. He says here, *"If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all."* [verse 35] There is nothing here about being the greatest. Here we run into the mindset of the customer once again. The world's idea of greatness involves getting

what we want. These days we hear a lot about freedom. It seems that people think that freedom means that you get to do whatever you want to do. You don't have to have any regard for the needs of anyone else. But that really isn't freedom. That is the sinful selfishness of the toddler who screams, "MINE!!" This is in freedom but slavery to our own arrogance. Jesus teaches us the exact opposite. His idea is to be asking what others need. His idea is for us to seek ways to fulfill those needs.

Jesus uses a little child here as an object lesson. If we look closely at how this child is described, he would most likely be a toddler – maybe one or at most two years old. Small children like this are very "needy" individuals. The younger they are the more this is true. Jesus uses this child to show how we are to look to the needs of others. He picks up the little one, gives him a hug and holds him in his lap. He tells us that the way that we would serve such a helpless little one is the way that he calls us to serve all others.

Sadly, our nature is to serve ourselves first. Ask yourself, "How well do I admit my mistakes to others?" Who gets taken care of first it comes to how we spend our money? Who do we think about first in our homes or in our families? What decides on the priorities for us here at church? Is it what I want? Or is it what is in the best interest of my brothers and sisters in Christ?

Jesus is the servant of all. He has proved that by the sacrifice that he willingly made. He served his heavenly Father perfectly with his whole life of sinlessness. This perfect service he bequeaths to us as if it were our very own. He is the servant of all by sacrificing himself to the cross and hell itself in payment for our sins of selfishness and entitlement. The one who is the greatest of all and worthy of every possible praise made himself nothing. The reason he did it was so that braggards like us are full of ourselves and think that we deserve everything could be freed from the prison of our own self-centeredness and be declared "Forgiven!" Jesus is indeed the servant of us all!

This service of Jesus to us is how Jesus calls us to be servants too. Jesus is the perfect example of what is sometimes called the "servant-leader." Even though he has all authority as God, he uses that authority to put the needs of others before his own. That's the point of Jesus using the little child. Parents and others have far more power than children and yet they set aside their power and even use it to provide for the needs of the child. Whatever power or authority we might have – whether it is small or great – is to be used as Jesus uses his power and authority. We will be the servants of all. Our greatest priority is not our own glory for our own desires. Instead we are constantly asking ourselves how can I best serve those around me? When I do, I am serving my Savior. I am serving my God.

Let us be servants of all like our Savior. As spouses let us look to the needs of our mate. As parents – to our children. At our jobs, let us be examples of faithfulness and helpfulness. As leaders in our congregation, let us consider the needs of all those God has called to us be responsible for and not just our own preferences and interests. As citizens, let us always seek to common good of all our neighbors. As we will sing in our final hymn this morning: *We all are called to service, to witness in God's name. Our ministries are different; our purpose is the same; to touch the lives of others with God's surpassing grace, so every folk and nation may feel God's warm embrace.* [CW 566:2]

Look to the service of Christ that saves us. In this we see that he is the servant of all in his service to us. Let us follow him and also be the servants of all. Let us serve each other eagerly and in love just as our Savior Jesus has served us. Amen.