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September 23, 2018

Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT
18th Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 9:30-37

Let us pray. Grant us, O God, to hear your voice, and in hearing your voice to love your word, and in loving your word to do you will through Christ our Lord. Amen

This week we had our first after school confirmation class. For our introductions to each other, each person told their name, grade, and their super power, meaning something they are really good at. I made that game up on the spot and as I prepared for today's sermon I thought, Wow, it is our human nature to desire greatness. We are prone to think about our strengths, especially as that sets us above one another

Last week Jesus asked his disciples the question, "Who do you say that I am?" When Peter answered, "The Messiah" that led to Jesus teaching what that would mean for those who would follow him. When we claim Jesus as the Messiah, the Savior sent by God, it says as much about us as his followers as it does about the One we follow.

Jesus told the disciples that those who would follow him would need to deny themselves, take up their cross and follow him. In today's reading, the disciples are caught arguing about who among them is the greatest. Like any good teacher, Jesus see this as a teachable moment to put some flesh on what it means to deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow him.

If we are to follow Jesus, we must do as Jesus does and deny our desire to strive for greatness as the world defines it. Instead, greatness is lived in lives of service, especially to the vulnerable in the world.

This is what Jesus did. He was a leader who served the poor, the sick, the desperate, and the outcasts. So it is tempting for us to assume that we are already leaders who must find a way to serve others. But what if we read this passage backwards, in a way? What if we start by seeing ourselves in the position of that little child in Jesus' arms?

We have all been at the bottom of the heap, overlooked or undervalued at one time or another. But sometimes we forget that. Maybe you felt that way as a child, in your teen years, or any number of times throughout your life. In order to see those who are overlooked or undervalued, it's important to remember when we were in those positions ourselves.

When were you the new person? Maybe when you started a new job or when you moved to a new town, when you went off to college or the military or relocated somewhere to get a fresh start. In those times we don't know how the system works, who's in power, and how we fit in.

When were you at the bottom of the heap? A freshman often has to learn the ways of surviving in each new level of schooling. Maybe school was hard for you and you struggled academically. Maybe you were in the general choir or band but not a soloist. You were on the team but sat the bench more than you played.

When were you overlooked? Was it when you became single after a divorce or the death of your spouse? It seems this is a world often designed for couples. Maybe you were the sibling who didn't get into trouble and didn't really excel at anything flashy. You were a good kid who didn't stand out, for better or for worse. Or maybe you were the one who got second or third or fourth place—not first, and not last. Sometimes it's the average who are the least noticed.

Or maybe you know what it is like to be abandoned or homeless or have an illness that frightens people and keeps them away. You might know what it is to hide from others because of abuse or addiction or the keeping of a secret you don't think anyone will understand or accept.

There are any number of circumstances that put us in places of vulnerability where only someone with power or resources can change our situation. Even if our life experience isn't the same as someone else's, it is by acknowledging our common need to be known and cared for that we can see that need in the lives of others.

We could come at this gospel passage from our places of privilege and leadership and achievement. Or we can get down on the floor and see it through the eyes of the child who was lifted onto Jesus' knee.

We have all been the "little children" Jesus lifts up at one time or another. This isn't a conversation about the great versus the not-great. Every person has been younger, smaller, less skilled, less experienced, or hurt. We all know what it means to be left out, put down, disgraced, or not acknowledged.

Even if we have not had the exact same experience as someone else, we learn to deny our own greatness when we recognize that each person carries one burden or another. We deny our own greatness when we set aside our power to walk alongside someone else in their time of need.

Jesus lifts up a little child to the ones who argue about who is the greatest and says, "When you deny your own greatness, you will be able to see the little ones around you. Then, when you see them, take up the cross of their need and serve them."

The good news is that that is what Jesus did for us. In this passage he is on his way to Jerusalem, on his way to the cross. It is there that he denied his own greatness. He took up the cross of human sin and suffering and put it to death. And by his resurrection we are free to redefine greatness as that which empowers the powerless.

When we claim Jesus as Messiah and Savior, we also claim the life of loving service that Jesus sets before us. When we follow Jesus, we are given the super power to see the overlooked, to welcome the stranger, to lift up the little ones among us.

Who are the "little ones" in our midst? May we be given the eyes to see them, the hands to serve them, and the hearts to love them.

Thanks be to God. Amen