**Text**: **Mark 9:30-37**

 **The Bethel Pulpit**

 **Pastor John O. Swanson**

 September 23, 2018 – 18 Sunday of Pentecost On the web at [www.bethel-madison.org](http://www.bethel-madison.org/)
 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him. 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 child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.” The Gospel of the Lord.

May grace and peace be yours in abundance, in the knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ our Lord.

What is greatness? That is the issue in our Gospel today. But to get at this issue, we need to take a step back. If you were with us last Sunday, you heard Pastor Margo preach from the last twelve verses of Mark 8, where Jesus asks that incredibly powerful question, “Who do you say that I am?”

Today we pick up in the 9th chapter of Mark, but the lectionary that we and many other Christian denominations use to select the readings that we will use from week to week, has taken us past 29 verses and has dropped us off at verse 30. We have missed a lot in that gap.

Mark 9 begins with Jesus taking a journey up to the top of a mountain. He has brought with him what seem to be his top three go-to disciples, Peter, James and John. Once at the top of the mountain, Jesus becomes dazzling white and Elijah and Moses - two great prophets from the Old Testament – appear before him. Then a cloud appears out of nowhere and a voice from the cloud says, “This is my Son, the Beloved: listen to him!”

They descended the mountain and Jesus met a man whose son was consumed by a spirit that consumed him and made his life and his father’s life unbearable. The father had asked the disciples who were still at the bottom of the mountain to help, but they couldn’t do anything. So, when Jesus arrived, he asked the father how long has this been happening. The father said, “From childhood.” He went on to say, “It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.” Jesus said to him, “If you are able! All things can be done for the one who believes.” And immediately the father cried out to Jesus, “I believe; help my unbelief!” And the boy was healed.

As they left that area we pick up with verse 30, where Jesus begins teaching again about his upcoming suffering and death. And for a second time the disciples do not understand what Jesus is talking about. As their walk continues, it seems that Jesus ends up walking ahead of the disciples, who begin talking with one another about greatness and end up arguing about whom amongst them is the greatest.

When they stopped at a home in Capernaum, Jesus asks them what they were arguing about; but the disciples were too embarrassed to say that they were arguing about who was the greatest among them. But Jesus knew; and so, when he sat down he says to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Now, Jesus had said things like this before to his disciples – to save your life you must lose it, whoever wants to be great must be a servant and now whoever wants to be first must be last. Maybe in the midst of him saying these words, Jesus saw in the disciples some glazed over eyes and mindlessly nodding heads and thought that his words were simply going in one ear and out the other.

Whatever the reason, he didn’t stop with those words. Instead, he took a little child and put that little child right there in the middle of all of them. And then Jesus lifted that little child up and held him or her in his arms and said, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not me, but the one who sent me.”

This child was as important to Jesus as was the vision that he had experienced on the mountaintop just a day or two before. And at that moment, as Jesus was holding that child and saying those words, I wonder what Peter and James and John were thinking. Do you think they remembered that voice from the cloud up on top of that mountain (“This is my son, the Beloved; listen to him!”)?

The journey that Jesus takes throughout the Gospel of Mark leads him through all sorts of interactions – many are with people who are cast offs, low-lifes, and nobodies, at least as far as the world is concerned.

Jesus encounters a leper in Mark 1, a tax collector in Mark 2, a man with a withered hand in Mark 3, a man possessed with a demon named Legion in Mark 5, a bleeding women – also in Mark 5, and a Syrophoenician women and her daughter in Mark 7. Jesus even takes the time to bless children who are brought before him in Mark 10, despite the stern resistance of his disciples – disciples who had heard Jesus say to them, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcome not me but the one who sent me.”

Children were just one of the many vulnerable, weak, and dependent groups of people that Jesus embraced, connected with and had time for – people that the world tended and tends to view as inconvenient, annoying, maybe even worthless.

True greatness, Jesus says to his disciples then and to his disciples today, (greatness) is not found in being above others, but being least of all and servant of all. It is not found in ascending the social ladder but descending it to take the lowest place. It is not found in seeking the company of the powerful, but in welcoming and caring for those without any status.

As I have reflected on these first thirty seven verses of Mark 9 (1-37), I have come to the conclusion that in an odd but wonderful way, they tell much of the truth about who Jesus was and is and why he died. It begins with this incredible moment on a mountaintop proclaiming who Jesus is – with a call from God that we are to listen to him. Next we find this beautiful interaction between Jesus and a desperate father who is clearly willing to do anything to help his son – anything, including admitting that his faith wavering and imperfect. And despite this admission, Jesus grace freely flows to this father and his son and the child is healed.

We then find Jesus telling the disciples the important truth about what will happen to him as he moves ever closer to the cross – Jesus speaks about the fact that he will die – but the disciples do not get it. Instead, they get caught up in the sad truth about what the world sees as important. And these verses end with a reminder from Jesus that greatness lies in helping, serving, caring, sharing – everything that is contour to what the world teaches.

Which then leads to why – why Jesus died. Jesus died because the world could not and cannot stomach the radical truth that greatness – greatness in God’s eyes – is not at all based on how the world views greatness.

Theologian Elisabeth Johnson writes, “The radical grace of God that Jesus proclaims and lives completely obliterates the world’s notions of greatness based on status, wealth, achievement, etc. Perhaps that is one reason we resist grace so much. It is much more appealing to be great on the world’s terms than on Jesus’ terms. Greatness on Jesus’ terms means being humble, lowly, and vulnerable as a child. Greatness on Jesus’ terms is risky; it can even get a person killed. But as Jesus teaches repeatedly, his way of greatness is also the path of life.”

One of the questions that the pastor who visited Bethel on Thursday that was interviewing for the position of lead pastor asked me when I met with him was, What, in your opinion, makes Bethel great?

I did not say anything about this building – about the remodeling that was just completed, the nice new bathrooms on the first floor or about anything else to do with our 50 or 60,000 square foot building. I also did not say anything about our 548 acre camp called Bethel Horizons with its 20 some buildings and awesome ropes course. I did not say anything about the many great senior pastors that we have had at Bethel and that we have immortalized in pictures upstairs in the hallway behind the balcony. And I did not say anything about the Bethel Foundation and its 17 million dollar value.

None of those things came to mind as I prepared to answer the question, which I had to confess as I talked to the candidate, was a rather interesting question given the fact that I was preaching today and had been wrestling with the word greatness this past week.

I told him that what makes Bethel great, and I had to be honest, so I told him that we are not always great – but what makes us great is when, through complete accident or sheer determination, we somehow become vulnerable enough to be open to God’s call to serve and to care for the least in our community. I said, because when that happens we are great – we are incredibly great.

What is greatness? Become vulnerable and find out. Amen.