

Sermon

September 24, 2006

Mark 9:30-37

(8:00 and 9:30 only: "To the Castle" at 5:30 and 11:00)

Sometimes,

as I look back through old sermons
that I have preached,
they are kind of like a diary,
a memory-book.

I was looking through some old sermons
and came across one

where I was talking about our two boys
when they were in 2nd and 5th grade.
Now one is a Sophomore in college
and the other a Junior in High School.

I was talking about chore charts.

We had a chore chart on our refrigerator,
so that everyone knew
who's turn it was to take out the trash.
Who sets the table.
How much piano practice needed to be done.
Things like that.

And then, every once in a while,

we'd give a reward.

Ruth and I would say,

"If you do all your chores
without us having to bug you about it–
–we'll give you something special."

Or during the summer,

we were trying to get the boys to read more.
So we said,
 “For each chapter book you read,
 we’ll go get ice cream.”
And for about a week,
 we went for ice cream every day.
Which wasn’t too bad a deal
 for the boys–
 –or for us.

But every once in a while,
 we’d have this conversation.
One of the boys would say something like:
 “If I do my chores–
 –can I have \$1.00”
 (or ice cream,
 or whatever).
We gave them the idea.
 And they learned the system well.

And I’d go into this lecture–
 “You’ll do your chores,
 but it’s not just to get a reward.
 We don’t have to give you anything to do your chores.
You do them because you’re part of the family–
 –and as part of the family,
 you have jobs to do.
You have responsibilities.
 You’re part of the family team.”

And they’d listen–
 –at least sort of–
 –they’d heard all this before.
 And they’re eyes kind of glaze over.
And when my speech was over,
 they’d say:
 “Yeah, I know.
 But when I’ve finished my chores,
 can we go get ice cream.”

Sometimes it just doesn’t sink in.
 Sometimes all you can see is the reward.

That's how I see the disciples in today's Gospel reading.
They'd heard Jesus talking about suffering
and even death.
But they didn't want to hear that.
They wanted to get beyond that.
They wanted the reward.
They were arguing about who was greatest.
Who'd get the best seat in heaven.
Who'd be honored the most in the kingdom.

I mean,
Jesus was a king.
And when you've got a king,
you always have key leaders.
Top officers.
Cabinet members.
Which one of them would it be?
Who was going to have the glory?
They figured that's what it was all about.

Just like we do—
—when we look beyond the chore to the reward.
When we look beyond the service
to what we hope is beyond.

And Jesus comes into our lives.
And the cross of Jesus
turns the world upside down.
Nothing is the way we think it ought to be.
Jesus says:
“Whoever wants to be first
must be last of all
and servant of all.”

He says to the disciples—
—and to us:
“You want to be first?”

You want to be greatest?
Then—serve.”

The word translated servant here
is “diakonos”--
—which, as I understand it,
literally means:
“one who waits on tables”.

That’s not how the disciples
were picturing the greatest.
They wanted to be the ones lounging around,
being served.
They didn’t want to be working
their fingers to the bone
making and serving the food.

I mean,
they were Jesus’ main men.
They were the top guys.
What’s this about serving tables?

And we twist it a different way, too.
We think—
—okay, I’ll serve tables now,
I’ll be a servant now—
—because then, eventually,
I’ll be first.
I’ll be glorified.
And someone else will be taking care of me.

We think,
“I can be a martyr for a while,
if I end up winning the big prize.”

I might be wrong,
but I don’t think that’s what Jesus is talking about.
I don’t think it’s—
—be a servant now

and then later you'll be served.

I think it's more like—

—serve now,

and keep on serving.

Because it's in the very act of serving
that you find joy and purpose
and fulfillment.

And sometimes that service is joyful.

Ask the people involved in the bread ministry.

Ask the folks on the trip to Louisiana this week—

—when they're back in town.

Ask youth who have been on a work trip.

Service,

at it's best,

can be really, really joyful.

And sometimes,

because of sin,

it's also painful.

Sometimes it's really, really hard.

But one way or the other,

in the very center of serving—

—we find greatness.

Not after serving—

—but in the very act of serving.

Jesus' greatness came on the cross.

Jesus said to his disciples:

“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.”
And the greatness doesn’t just come in the resurrection.
The greatness is already there on the cross.

But the disciples didn’t get it.
And they didn’t really want to ask.
Because they didn’t want that kind of kingdom.
They wanted the kind
 where kings act the way we expect kings to act.
Where kings us their power like you’d expect.

But that’s not who Jesus is—
 —he’s not just another king.
He is the king of kings
 and Lord of lords.
But he is also the king who rules by serving—
 —who reigns in love

And that’s how we are greatest, too.
When we serve because we love.
 Serving because we have first been served.
 Loving because he have first been loved.

I heard a preacher talk about heaven.
And as he was describing heaven,
 he was describing how one part of heaven
 would be all the great golf courses
 that we can play—
 —even though we never played them on earth.

And I hope he’s right.
Sounds like fun to me.
 And somewhere in eternity,
 my game might even improve.

But I’m not sure that’s the essence of heaven.
I’m not sure heaven is filled with joy
 because we are pampered and taken care of.
I wonder if, instead,
 heaven will be a place where we are diakonos—
 —where we are servants—

–and we love it.
We don't fight it.
We don't want glory for ourselves.
We are perfectly content serving one another.
Can you imagine how wonderful that kind of heaven would be?

Can you imagine the wonder
if we started living that way now,
here on earth?

When I catch glimpses of that kind of loving service,
it's wonderful.
And I'm not sure I can imagine
a better heaven than that.

We catch glimpses of people like that.
Never perfectly—not on this earth.
But it is nice to catch a glimpse.

Like the Apostle Paul,
who never evaluated his life
by that which he laid hold of,
but by that which laid hold of him.

Those who find their renewal not in saving their strength,
but in giving their lives away.

There was an inspection team checking out the work of
a group of missionary nurses
in a poor, third-world country.
The nurses had next to nothing to work with,
except their time and their hands and their hearts.
The machinery and medicine were scarce.

And one of the inspection team
said to one of the nurses:
“I wouldn’t do what you’re doing
for a million dollars.”

And without a moment’s hesitation,
the nurse replied:
“Neither would I.”

The significance of her life
and that which gave her joy
was in much more than money.
Her joy was in serving.
As Christ serve.
As Christ called her to serve.

Or another glimpse...

In the 1930's and into the 40's,
there were two families who owned nurseries in California—
—competitors really.
Located side by side,
they both grew wonderful roses.
And one of the families was owned by a family
that had immigrated from Japan.

And then came that day that shall “live in infamy”.
Pearl Harbor was attacked.
And in the fear and hatred that followed,
the Japanese American family was taken away
to a detention camp.

The family that owned the other nursery
could have rejoiced
because their competition was gone.
But they didn’t.
You know what they did?
They made arrangements to take over
and operate the business
of the absentee owner,

as well as their own.

The roses grew to maturity and were sold.
Books were kept and profits deposited—
—to each of the nurseries.
And you know what?
Love bloomed
and life grew richer
for the neighbor who was helping out.
Who was called a fool.
Because he chose to serve
and not take advantage of the situation.

And he was a fool—I suppose.
He was a fool for Christ's sake.

When the war was over
and the imprisoned family returned,
they expected to find their nursery in shambles.
Instead,
they found a thriving business maintained
by a very tired neighbor
who had given himself in service.

When you pass that nursery
and look in the windows,
you see crossed beams
that mark the rows of plantings.
Crosses.
And in those crosses,
you see another cross.
The love of the cross
reflected in the love and service

that gives life
in the midst of sacrifice,
in the midst of giving.

Do you want to be great?
Then be a servant.
And the greatness won't come to you
somewhere down the line.
The greatness is there
in the very midst of the serving.

And the greatest of all
is Jesus—
—the one who serves,
even so far as going to the cross.

May our lives reflect that love
and that service
as we reach out to God's world.

In Jesus' name,
Amen