

welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.” Does it fill you with joy how often Jesus seems to be surrounded by children? Is that so fitting? That he can just pull them into an embrace, and talk to them, and bless them. How fitting is it that Jesus loves children that much! He uses one of them as an example. Jesus wants his disciples to see how much he, the servant of all cares about even just one person, even just this child. They can take their focus off of themselves, and put it onto a little one like this.

You have been served by Jesus, the servant of all, the one who is first because he became last, and now he points out how you can do the same. You don’t need to focus on who is the greatest. Instead, you can focus on the little ones, welcoming them in Jesus’s name and so welcoming Jesus himself—and even the Father. Who are these little ones? They aren’t just children. They’re the weak in the faith who need your encouragement. They’re the sick who need your words of comfort. They’re the ones who have gone astray. I bet you can think of someone who you haven’t seen in church for a while. And of course, they’re the children. Have you considered how they think and feel? Have you considered what example you are setting for them? They are the ones Jesus would have you serve, and by serving them you serve God.

While I was preparing this sermon, Pastor Degner and Pastor Nass reminded me of an excellent motto: “Humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less.” That’s what Jesus wants you keep in mind, too. He doesn’t want you to think you’re worthless or useless, in fact, he wants you to forget yourself. He wants you to put your focus on serving those who need to be served—to feel what they feel, to know their needs. Who is the greatest? It doesn’t need to be me or you. We don’t even need to worry about the question. We can put our focus on those who need our service and finding the way to help. Spend some time thinking about that this week. Who is someone that needs your service? You serve your Lord by serving them. Amen.

Mark 9:30-37
Pastor Justin Heise

Pentecost 17
September 28 & October 1, 2017

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.”

The Servant is the Greatest

When I was a counselor at Camp Phillip, I once had a difficult cabin. I remember it just because it was so difficult, and most cabins weren’t like that. All ten of my campers were in fourth grade, and they were having a great time the first day. We swam, we sang, we played games—all around fun. The morning of the second day, we had a Bible study about how we were once God’s enemies, but because of Jesus, we are now God’s friends and friends with each other. It was about how Jesus brought us peace. That Bible study was the first thing we did. The next thing was outdoor sports. I don’t remember what the game we were going to play was, but I do remember it wasn’t boxing. Even though that’s what my campers thought it was. Maybe I missed the tension brewing between these two, but by then they were ready to let it out. I had to pull them apart and take one to the nurse. Afterward, I talked with both of them and I asked them if they remembered what the Bible study had been about, and they remembered, but they were too ashamed to tell me.

Sometimes people just miss the point like those campers. It didn’t make sense for them to hear about God’s peace for their lives, and then to take their fists and punch each other. But they did. They missed the point. And the disciples in our Gospel do also. They’re going through what you might call their “seminary training.” This was a special time in Jesus’ ministry when Christ spend time alone training his disciples, because he knew what was coming. He knew that he would die, rise, and as-

end. He was preparing them to take up their ministries after him. We even know what he was teaching them about: **“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.”** Jesus was going to die for the sins of all and rise again. Earlier in his ministry, Jesus didn’t talk about his death and resurrection as much. He was focused on preaching and healing. But, now as his ministry comes to a close, he was very focused. He was very clear about his mission.

The disciples don’t get it. Mark evens explains as much: **“They did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.”** They had seen Jesus do so many things. He was their friend, their role model, and more. Of course, they would respond with distress and sorrow, but it led them to fear and not to understand. They didn’t even want to ask Jesus more about it. They didn’t ask Jesus what it meant that he was going to die. They didn’t ask Jesus what it meant that he was going to rise. They didn’t ask what it meant for them. Instead, they tried to figure it out on their own. They stepped out of this grace-filled conversation from their Lord, and into one driven by selfish ambitions and pride. They started *arguing* about which of them was the greatest. Was it Peter? Was it John? What is James? They all had good points for why it was them.

Jesus knows what they are arguing about. So, he asks them. I bet the silence was deafening. It was less embarrassing for them to say nothing to say, “Well, Jesus, we just heard about what you came to accomplish for the entire world, and we were trying to figure out which one of us would be the most important after you were gone.” So, they say nothing. They sit there in shame. They didn’t get it. Shouldn’t it have been obvious to them that being the greatest was not the point? They had just heard how Jesus had come to serve the entire world, but they weren’t willing to serve. Instead, they wanted it to be seen how important they were. Forgotten was the great act of service by their great Master, so they could figure out who had the highest rank.

But, we shouldn’t think too little of the disciples, especially not before recognizing that we do this same thing. We miss the point too. Jesus tells us, **“If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all,”** and we give his words lip-service before going home or work or school and contradicting it. Or what else is behind the argument of a husband and wife, except that one believes they are more important than the other? What else is behind an attitude of a student who takes his ball and goes home because the other children won’t play the way he wants, except that he believes what he wants his more important? What else is behind that irksome feeling you get when something at church is not done the way you want, except that you believe what you think is better? What if they took a poll at your work place

about who the hardest worker, the most well-liked, or whatever, wouldn’t you want the results of the poll to be you? So that everyone can see that you are the greatest.

If you want to see an example of how convinced people are that they are the most important, just look at what happened in the NFL last weekend. If you didn’t know about this, there was a controversy about whether NFL players should stand for the national anthem. Some players chose to kneel as a form of protest. But, take a step back from that and consider the responses from different people. No matter what their position was on it, people have been willing to get into other people’s faces about it on the news. People have been willing to go on Facebook and Twitter and say just what they’re thinking. Can you sense how convinced people can become they’re ideas are the most important, that their ideas matter more than the other side, or my neighbor, or my country’s leader or the NFL commissioner? In all of that, do you get the sense that people are doing what Jesus says, **“If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all”**?

Admit it. Sometimes people just miss Jesus’s point. Sometimes, you miss Jesus’s point. You want to be first, and you want to show that you deserve to be there. You want to be the greatest, and you want to convince everyone else that you are. How does Jesus respond to this? He responds in the best way. He doesn’t point to himself, and say, “Guys, don’t you realize that I am the greatest?” Then, he would be doing the same thing they are. Jesus doesn’t start posturing. He doesn’t pull rank. Instead, he says, **“If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.”** The disciples attitude, and ours, toward what it means to be great must be changed, in fact, it must be radically reversed. The person who is first, is not the one who towers over others with intelligence, position, or ability; the one who is the greatest is the one down in the dirt, who sympathizes with others’ needs, who helps *everyone* in any way possible, who isn’t out for themselves. The servant is the greatest.

Jesus doesn’t point to himself, because he doesn’t have to. If you look through all of history, can you find anyone better described by the words, “Servant of all,” than Jesus? This is exactly what he was teaching the disciples, and it’s what he is teaching us today. Jesus served you by being born as a tiny baby. He served you by living a perfect life in your place. He served you by dying on what should have been your cross. He served you by rising again. Jesus is down in the dirt, sympathizing with our every need, helping everyone in the best way. Jesus is the servant of all. And he’s your servant. He takes care of your greatest need by giving you forgiveness and eternal life.

Then, **“[Jesus] 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**