

The Seventh Sunday in Martyrs' Tide, September 22, 2024

Pastor Peter Gregory, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Westminster, Massachusetts

Who Is the Greatest?

Mark 9:30–37

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Eph 1:2

Jesus said, **“If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.” And He took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in His arms, He said to them, “Whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me, and whoever receives Me, receives not Me but Him who sent Me”** (vv 35b–37).

Which apostle is the G.O.A.T. — the greatest of all time? We use that kind of language with Super Bowl rings, Olympic medals, 50-50 seasons, and top hits on the Billboard Charts. But how would you even begin to measure or compare the greatness of apostles? Is it Peter because, well, he’s Peter — the apparent leader, outspoken and bold, for good or for ill? What about his brother, Andrew? After all, Andrew’s the one who brought Peter to Jesus. Or maybe John? He had the longest run as an apostle and was the only one to die a natural death, somewhere near the end of the first century. Or James? Not the first martyr (that was Stephen), but the first apostle to be martyred — to seal his apostleship with blood.

They came to Capernaum. And when [Jesus] was in the house He asked them, “What were you discussing on the way?” But they kept silent, for on the way they’d argued with one another about who was the greatest (vv 33–34). Honestly, it all seems pretty petty to me — this jockeying for position, this seeking after honor and recognition. At this point they don’t even have much to argue about. Sure, they’d left everything to follow Jesus. And three of them — Peter, James, and John — had gone with Jesus to His transfiguration. But that’s about all they’d done. They’d done little preaching, few miracles, and no church planting. They’d barely suffered, and none had borne witness to the point of martyrdom. So what really do they have to argue about?

Yet “the world seeks to be praised and honored by the mighty” (*LSB* 730:2). And so do the apostles. And so do we — if we’re willing to admit it. How? In the way we try to prove ourselves in front of others. We play up the things that make us look good — our knowledge, our accomplishments, our time. And we don’t hesitate to cut others down to size. How much of social media is simply a runway for showing off, for appearances?

We make our lives seem more glamorous and important than they really are. We also easily take offense. We feel judged by others. We make things about us even when they're not about us at all. We suffer under the constant compulsion to compare ourselves and our lives with others. No, we aren't immune from **bitter jealousy and selfish ambition** (Jas 3:14).

This shows just how far we are from the kingdom of God. Jesus had been teaching about His great Passion. It's so vividly set before His eyes, in fact, that He speaks of it in the present tense: **The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill Him. And when He is killed, after three days He will rise** (v 31). Yet all the apostles can do is argue about their own greatness. I get it. Nobody wants to talk about the greatness revealed in suffering and in mercy given to those who don't deserve it. Being delivered into the hands of men, killed, and rising again after three days isn't anyone's idea of greatness. Yet that's all Jesus wants to talk about.

So He sits down, calls the twelve, and says to them, **"If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all."** And to demonstrate what He means, He picks up a child playing nearby, puts that child right in the middle of them, takes it up into his arms, and says, **"Whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me, and whoever receives Me, receives not Me but Him who sent Me"** (v 37). The fact is that children weren't valued very highly in Jesus' day. They didn't receive the kind of attention and focus that we give to children now. They were often considered lesser and unimportant, a burden rather than a blessing. The disciples were really the ones acting like children in their petty arguments over who was better and who was worse. Jesus takes that child in His arms and makes this the sign of His kingdom. The first shall be last and the last shall be first. The greatest is the one who is servant of all, even of little children.

Whoever receives one such child . . . Scripture makes clear: **Children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one's youth. Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them** (Ps 127:3–5)! Within marriage, welcome all the children that God gives. Yet we also recognize the sorrow and pain of the childless and of those who have lost children. We live in a society that increasingly sees children as a burden, not a blessing, and tries to fix the so-called problem of unwanted children by disposing of the child. How can we ignore or downplay the issue of abortion when our Lord Jesus takes little children up into His arms? He Himself was that little child at one time, received by Mary and cared for by Joseph.

Whoever receives one such child in My name, Jesus says. How do we do that? By bringing children to Holy Baptism where they are joined to His death and resurrection. By teaching them His Word and making known to them His love. By receiving them here in the Divine Service even with the squirms and squawks. Sure, there are times when they need to be taken out—but that’s the exception. Where they should be, if possible, is here with Jesus. Jesus loves them. Jesus loves *you*. Jesus loves me.

The greatest is the one who is servant of all. That’s not a recipe for greatness, a hack for how to get ahead. Jesus is talking about His own death and resurrection. Greater love has no one than this, that He lays down His life for those He love. Don’t hear this primarily as a principle to apply to your life but as the shape of grace that has to come from above because it cannot come from us.

The point isn’t about helping us improve so that we can be better people. This is directed squarely at our sinful nature, for that sinful nature continues to fight for a righteousness of our own that makes us look better and others worse. We know that other people are hard to love. We find them hard to love. But we still want to think that there’s something in us that makes us worthy, lovable, deserving of salvation. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is shocking, because His grace is for the unworthy and undeserving. He was willing to lay down His life not for the greatest but for the least, the smallest, the weakest.

The kingdom of God is won by losing. Jesus loses His life. He doesn’t overcome our enemies with His almighty power but with His almighty love, by giving Himself as the perfect sacrifice for our sins and for the sins of the world. He doesn’t leave His enemies in a trail of blood and death, but instead He sheds His own blood and enters into death for us. And then He caps it all off by rising from the dead with the scars to prove it.

Jesus has honored us with His own precious blood. He values us by taking us with those scarred hands. What then is the shape of our lives? It’s not to place ourselves at the head but to carry our own crosses and give up our lives in suffering and service just as He did for us. We’re finally and fully set free not to think more highly of ourselves but to love as He has loved us, to serve as He has served us, to count others more significant than yourselves.

Jesus never describes the church or Christians as an occupying force. Instead, He calls His people salt and light. He doesn’t ask us to carry Him; He promises to carry us. He doesn’t ask us to fight for Him; He insists that He has fought for us. When He sends us out in His name, He calls us children of God—little children with nothing to say except what the Lord has said and with no victory to boast of except the victory that comes by

the suffering, death, and defeat of the cross. Tell the world this, dear Christian: “Jesus loves me.” And that He loves them, too.

Jesus isn’t encouraging us to be childish. We already know how to do that. He calls us to be childlike. As a child trusts its parents and receives their loving without having to earn it, so we trust Jesus and rejoice in His unmerited and unearned love. We offer Him all our sins, all the reasons why we’re nobodies, and He point us back to His gift of baptism and says, “There! There I claimed you as my own and made you mine.” Once we were no people but now we are His people—led by His Word, fed by His body and blood. Though we were the least, the lost, and the last (and still are, according to the world), He serves us by His death and resurrection. He makes us better than great—He makes us His, forgiven, loved, redeemed.

This is the message we bear to the world. The cross has exalted Christ. His is the name above all names. Before Him every knee shall bow. He alone shall every tongue confess. And who are we? We are His people, His beloved. We are the little ones for whom Jesus was delivered into the hands of men, killed, and on the third day rose again.

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Phil 4:7