

when adults act like kids
and kids act like adults



**“When Adults Act Like Kids
and Kids Act Like Adults”**

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Saturday and Sunday, September 22-23, 2018

All Services

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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Mark 9:30-37

Confession: I am highly competitive, and I am a perfectionist. The silliest things bring out my competitive side. If I see someone else in a restaurant parking lot, I must make sure that I get to the door first, so I can be seated first. The person on the treadmill near me seems to be running at a higher speed than I am. I should definitely increase my speed! My perfectionism comes out most notably in my sermon writing. This sermon is awful. I'm going to scrap it and start all over again.

This is my entry point into our story for today. I totally get why the disciples are fighting. They were arguing over who is the greatest. Often times, we give the disciples such a hard time. We wonder why they can't seem to understand what Jesus is about. After all, if we were the disciples of Jesus back then, we would totally be listening intently and understanding every word that Jesus spoke.

But, if we are being honest with ourselves, we – like the disciples before us - have a hard time understanding Jesus and what Jesus is all about.

Last week, we heard Peter rebuke – scold – Jesus for saying that he was to suffer, die and rise again. Pastor Horner explained to us that Peter and the other disciples understand this message to be offensive. One of my seminary professors said that Jesus, the Son of God, on the cross was “scandalous!” How could the Messiah suffer, die and rise again? That is not what the Messiah should be doing! The Messiah is to be powerful! The Messiah is to be a king! So, Peter tries to correct Jesus. Peter tells Jesus that's not what is supposed to happen. Then, Jesus explains the way of the cross that involves sacrifice. Flash forward a few chapters to where we are today...

Even after hearing Jesus explain his role as the Messiah and their call as his disciples, they still don't get it, so Jesus repeats himself – that's what we heard at the beginning of our story for today. Even after hearing this for a second time, the disciples don't get it because on the way to Capernaum, they fight over who will be the greatest! Again, we think, “oh my gosh, these guys are so stupid! Why aren't they listening to what Jesus is trying to teach them?” Well, if we are being honest with ourselves, we are too fight over who is the greatest. We too don't always understand who Jesus is and what Jesus is about. Jesus is still trying to teach us!

After all, our society values greatness. Our society values power and prestige. Maybe you can think of a time when you heard an argument like this one between the disciples...? "I'm the best!" "No, I'm the best!" It sounds silly, but we've heard it. I think of the bickering between and competition among the characters on the television drama, *Grey's Anatomy*. As a group of surgical interns, the characters are constantly fighting over who is the best surgical intern, jockeying for position and abusing their fellow interns along the way. Society wants us – expects us! - to be the greatest, or at least strive to be. And then, like the disciples, we start bickering over who is the greatest and not being very nice to one another in the process.

But, here comes Jesus who will throw these societal values upside down. Jesus asks the disciples, "What were you arguing about on the way?" After all, Jesus knew what they were arguing about, and he saw this as an opportunity to teach his disciples. Jesus was asking a question he knew the answer to already.

Jesus takes a child into his arms to illustrate something for his disciples. To our modern ears and eyes, we view this moment as sweet. But, what we don't understand is this moment is very radical for Jesus' time. We could say this is another "scandalous" moment in Jesus' ministry.

Because in Jesus' time, children were essentially non-people. Children were socially invisible. A child should not have been following this teacher and his students around. By taking this child into his arms, Jesus is teaching his disciples an important lesson, and we as Jesus' disciples today should be paying attention. Jesus is teaching and modelling service and love for those society deems invisible, unimportant, as less than.

Jesus doesn't call us to greatness. Jesus calls us to service.

Jesus calls us to what Henri Nouwen, the Catholic priest, writer, professor, and theologian, called "downward mobility." Nouwen writes, "The society in which we live suggests in countless ways that the way to go is up. Making it to the top, entering the limelight, breaking the record – that's what draws attention, gets us on the front page of the newspaper, and offers us the rewards of money and fame. The way of Jesus is radically different. It is the way not of upward mobility but of downward mobility. It is going to the bottom, staying behind the sets, and choosing the last place! Why is the way of Jesus worth choosing? Because it is the way Jesus took..."

Nouwen's own life story illustrates what he means by "downward mobility." In 1986 – after years of teaching at Notre Dame, Yale, and Harvard and writing theology – Nouwen moved to L'Arche Daybreak, a home for young people with disabilities and where he would spend the last ten years of his life. There, Nouwen learned that his theological writings didn't matter, how smart he was didn't matter. But, what did matter was his relationships and his love and service to those who called L'Arche home.

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Brothers and sisters, that is the good news out of today's story. But, we shouldn't view this message as constricting, rather we should view it as freeing. Why? Because we

have received a gift, the gift of God's grace. There is a reason Jesus teaches the disciples about what will happen to him on the cross while he explains their call as his disciples because the two are related.

Maybe you have heard or seen the Martin Luther quote: "God does not need your good works, but your neighbor does." It has been all over my Facebook lately. God's gift of grace frees us. We are okay with God. Our sins are forgiven; our sins don't hang over our heads. God frees us from sin, so we don't have to worry. That is why Luther wrote "God does not need your good works..." God does not need our good works for us to receive grace; we've already got it! Grace frees us to love and serve our neighbors because we don't need to worry about our standing before God.

We don't have to worry about being the best. And I don't know about you, but this is so freeing for me because this reminds me to give myself a little grace. My competitiveness and my perfectionism are things that drive me to be too hard on myself in the same way that they drive me to be unkind and unloving toward my neighbors. This story is a lesson not just about love of others but also love of myself. God bestows grace upon us again and again. If God gives me grace, and God gives you grace, I must remember to give myself some grace. We are not called to greatness, brothers and sisters. But, we are called to live, love and serve with the gift of grace in our hearts and in our minds.

Amen.

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