

**Pentecost 16B – Proper 20B (9/20/09 – *True Greatness in God's Kingdom*)**

In the Name JESUS. [Amen]

Today we continue right on the heels of last week's Gospel – right after Jesus cast out the demon from that anxious father's son ... and pointed to the lack of faith and prayer as the reason why the disciples could not.

And what contrasts we see today! Indeed, what sinful, double-mindedness – to put it in the terms of our *Epistle*! The Lord has shown the disciples heavenly glory in His Transfiguration – but they preoccupy themselves with only earthly fame. (JAMES says that this is not merely *earthly*, but actually *unspiritual* and *demonic* [3.15].) Christ shows them gentleness and humility: *I was like a gentle Lamb led to slaughter* [JER 11.19] – but they are boisterous and haughty. Jesus was self-effacing and threw Himself on the mercy of His heavenly Father: *for to You have I committed My cause* [JER 11.20] – but the disciples are proud and are trusting in their own laurels and ingenuity to jockey for position.

It is, really, quite incredible ... how ignorant our sinful flesh is – as the disciples demonstrate in their actions. For what we see in the disciples in MARK 9 is far from the greatness they are vying for. Peter, James, and John on the Mount of Transfiguration are quite confused when they see Jesus glorified, speaking with Moses and Elijah. They are quite terrified when the bright cloud covers them and the voice of the Father resounds: *This is My beloved Son; listen to Him* [MK 9.7] They are quite perplexed by Jesus' Word regarding His upcoming *rising from the dead* [9.10]. When they have come down and find the event we heard last Sunday – how the other nine disciples had been unable to cast the demon out of the father's son – all we see is confusion again ... and despair. And when the Lord has taught His disciples once again that, *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.* [9.31], we hear that the disciples *did not understand the saying, and were AFRAID to ask Him* [9.32]. Are they afraid of the Cross ... or are they afraid of Jesus' response should they ask for clarification?

But the sinful flesh – yours and mine – will not recognize its utter impotence. It stands proud and tall and would rule the world – or at least lord it over those around. Nor will your sinful flesh recognize its ignorance. Rather, it thinks itself quite wise and understanding. The truth is quite the opposite, however. That’s why James says: *if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.* [3.14-15] Such earthly, unspiritual “wisdom” is what James later calls *friendship with the world* ... which *is enmity with God* [4.4].

Our Lord teaches the lesson another way ... visually – as He often did. After chiding His disciples and telling them the way things are in the Kingdom of God – namely, *If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all* [Mk 9.35] – Jesus *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”* [9.36-37].

And the lesson is this: Who would think of serving a little child as that which makes one great? It is, actually, the complete opposite of worldly greatness. Those who are great in the world want to **be** served – not to serve. And if they must serve someone else ... well, let it be someone really big ... really powerful ... really rich ... really, really important. But a child has no particular greatness – at least not yet. And serving a child – receiving a child, as Jesus puts it – makes one lower than the child; for the servant serves one who is greater.

Once again our Lord sets our worldly thinking on its head – turns it ... and us ... upside down. Greatness in the Kingdom of God is not measured the way we think of it according to our sinful, selfish ambition. Greatness in the Kingdom of God is not measured in **being** served, but in **servi**ng others – in serving the last and the least ... in serving those who can’t really serve back ... in serving those who can’t really reward us for our service ... indeed, in serving those who can’t even really thank us in so many words for serving them (like a very little child). There is no earthly glory in it –

nothing in which to boast from a worldly perspective. If you serve the most humble in society – the most helpless ... a little child – you are more humble still. And the sinful flesh just doesn't like that.

If our hands are going to be cleansed and our hearts purified [JAM 4.8] – if we are going to be humble before the Lord – then it will have to happen from outside of us. The Lord will have to do it!

This is the other lesson that we may learn in our Savior's visual example. Notice that **Jesus took the child and put him the in midst of** His disciples. That little, humble child wasn't going to get there on his own. The Lord must do it. And He did! Then Jesus also took the child in His arms. Again, Christ's doing! And when Jesus says: **Whoever receives one such child in My Name receives Me, and whoever receives Me, receives not Me but Him Who sent Me** – first, understand this as **receives not JUST Me but ALSO Him Who sent Me** (since Jesus and the Father are One); second, realize that receiving a child in the Name of Christ (and the Father) proceeds from faith ... by the working of the Holy Spirit. We humbly receive – and serve – the humble in the Name of Jesus only as we receive Jesus and His Name (**CHRISTian**) from our gracious Lord through God-given faith.

But more than that. When our Savior says: **Whoever receives one such child in My Name** ... we should consider above all not **our own** receiving of children (or anyone else, for that matter) in the Name of Jesus, but **Jesus** receiving **us** in His Own Name ... and **Jesus** thus **making us** children of the heavenly Father. Before Jesus directs **us** to receive such a child, **He Himself** receives him ... sets him in their midst ... and graciously takes him up in His loving arms. That is **more** than example – and certainly more than simply a necessary step in order to teach the disciples (and us) a lesson. That is Christ showing us Who He is and what He is about in this world. That is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself **servng!**

Of course, we have a fuller Word of our Lord on this seeking of greatness and this serving. In the very next chapter of Mark's Gospel we hear: **You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over**

*them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.*” [10.42-45] Jesus Christ our Lord – **the** LORD of all – did not exercise His authority by lording it over us. He could have simply commanded, demanded, and condemned. That **is** His authority as Lord. But *True Greatness in God’s Kingdom* is characterized by humility and self-giving service. And that is the true greatness lived by our Savior – **for us and for our eternal salvation!** The Son of God makes Himself last of all His creation by taking on our humble, weak, human flesh and serving every last one of us with His very life ... and death ... and resurrection. He Who **alone** has the right that **all** things should serve Him ... instead **serves** ... to the very last drop of *His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death* [SC II.2] ... giving *His life as a ransom for many* ... for **all ... for us.**

And, indeed, this **is** Christ’s greatness ... this **is** Christ’s great glory – and **ours** by grace ... who are made children of God **in Him** through Baptism and faith. Precisely **in** His **servicing** Christ our Lord shows true greatness – not just as example ... but, indeed, as working our salvation. Christ our Lord has made Himself *last of all and Servant of all* – by His incarnation ... by His holy ministry ... and most especially by His crucifixion and resurrection (by allowing Himself *to be delivered into the hands of men* ... who *kill Him* ... and *when He is killed, after three days* He rose again from death and grave). In fact, Christ our Lord **still** shows His true greatness in serving us today – with His Word ... His grace and mercy ... and even with His true Body and Blood for the forgiveness of all our sin.

Thus we pray this day: *O God, Whose strength is made perfect in weakness* – and Whose greatness is displayed in Your humble service to all by Your Cross – *grant us humility and childlike faith that we may please You in both will and deed* ...

In the Name of the FATHER and of the ✠ SON and of the HOLY SPIRIT. [Amen]