

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish,
St. Francisville, LA
23 September 2018

Mark 9: 30-37

There is a story I love in *Journey to the East* by Herman Hesse. The author tells the story of a French monastery whose Abbot, Brother Leo, was known throughout Europe for his extraordinary leadership and wisdom. As it was customary in those days, these famous Abbots received visitors from all over the world. Men and women seeking the wise man's counsel. The book tells the story of several monks who began a pilgrimage to visit Brother Leo's monastery in the South of France. From the very start of the journey, the band of brothers began to bicker about who should do various chores, who should cook, whose responsibility it was to carry the provisions for the group, etc. Their lack of agreement was creating serious problems for the group and the expedition was in danger of ending prematurely, until the group met another monk in route to the monastery. This monk joyfully did his chores, helped those who were weak and needed assistance, comforted those who were feeling discouraged in the long trip, and whenever the others would fight over a chore, he would gracefully volunteer to do it himself. Very quickly, the rest of the monks were following his example, and, very soon, they began to work together smoothly and without conflict. This monk became the glue that held the group together and everyone could feel his extraordinary presence among them. Finally, the group reached the imposing monastery with its dozens of buildings and hundreds of monks and workers. When they reached the gate, one of the monks asked to see Brother Leo. The man at the gate started to laugh. Finally, he said to them, "Our great Abbot is among you!" And he pointed to the monk who had joined them on the journey.

This story tells us a great deal about Christian leadership. Brother Leo knew that when you love Christ and give your life over to him, your life becomes so transformed that you no longer relate to others according to rank, socio-economic status, or popularity. When a Christian makes a choice to lead, he in fact makes a choice to treat peasants and presidents with the same respect. We agree to see everyone as "The Most Important Member of the Team", as "Indispensable", and as "God's own Son". This is the true mark of leadership, the ability to lead through service. This is the message Jesus wants his disciples to learn today.

Let us speak briefly about the context of the reading from the Gospel of Mark before we continue. According to Pastor Brian Stoffregen from Cross Marks Christian Resources, "There are three accounts in Mark where Jesus announces his impending passion and resurrection to the disciples. All three predictions follow the same structure.

(a) Jesus predicts his passion, death and resurrection, (b) the Disciples or Apostles misunderstand what he is trying to tell them, and (c) Jesus gives further instructions.”

In the Gospel last week we saw the first prediction in chapter 8:31-9:1. (a) Jesus states to the disciples and the crowds that he will soon be betrayed, handed over to the authorities and crucified. (b) Peter rebukes him and Jesus rebukes him back by calling him “Satan” and accusing him of thinking in human ways and not in divine ways. (c) He calls the crowds to him and says, “If any one wants to follow me, let him deny himself first, take up his cross, and follow me...”.

Today, we have the second prediction in Mark 9:30-37: (a) Jesus is teaching just to his disciples this time. He says, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after he has been killed, he will rise again”. (b) Again his disciples misunderstand what he is saying, and remain silent with him. But, as soon as they start walking towards Jerusalem, they begin to argue among themselves about who the leader will be if Jesus in fact dies. (c) Jesus then proceeds with the following instruction, “Whoever wants to be the first must be last of all and servant of all”. Then he took a little child and put it among them; and said, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.” In about a month’s time, the RCL will give us the opportunity to discuss the third prediction, but as of today, let us talk about this second prediction in more detail.

First, in the other two predictions, Jesus states that he will be handed over to the Pharisees and the Scribes and that they, in turn, will hand him over to Gentiles to be sentenced to death. In the prediction today, however, Jesus says that he will be handed over into human hands. A more proper translation would be, handed over to “humanity”. “There is an implication here that the people who put Jesus to death were representatives of the entire human race for whom Jesus died.” (Stofregen). In a real sense, we all participated in this trial and crucifixion. Mark wants us to know that we were all there and we are all responsible for what happened to Jesus.

Second, this is the first time the disciples begin to think about the “what ifs” of their ministry. “What if what he says is true and he is killed. Who is going to lead us then? How will we go on?” They begin to think about credentials, promotions, greatness, qualifications, reasons why each deserved advancement. In short, they still did not understand Jesus’ leadership style. They still did not understand that Christian leadership begins with service, is focused on service, and seeks to do nothing more than to serve.

Third, Jesus uses a small child to teach his disciples a lesson about servant ministry. He holds a small child and says, “Whoever welcomes such a child, welcomes me and the one who sent me”. Today, in the 21st century, we often miss the great significance of this gesture. When we look at a child, we see everything that is pure,

noble, and innocent. We all see children with 21st century eyes. Children have become the center of our home, of our society, and of our Western world. But, this was not the case in Jesus' time. Children were often given to slaves and servants to raise and the parents seldom spent time with them. They had no voice, no standing, and no rights until they were about 12 or 13 years of age. It is believed that almost 30% of all children died at childbirth or soon after. About sixty percent of all live births would not survive to the age of 12. Many children in the Roman empire who were sick at birth or who were "unwanted" were simply abandoned on the garbage hills of the city. Little children were less than zero. They had no voice, no standing, no rights, and were often abused and mistreated. When Jesus took a small child in his hands, this was absolutely revolutionary! In a way, the small child represented the weakest of the weak, the neediest of the needy, the poorest of the poor, the most neglected, the outcast, those for whom society has no use, the worthless. And yet, it is this "little one" that Jesus uses to say, "If you want to lead, welcome these little ones and serve them as I have served you."

There is an apocryphal story about sister Theresa of Calcuta. It is rumored that during a specially difficult time of her ministry, when her sisters were beginning to become resentful about the amount of work and the hopelessness of their endeavor, the sister met with her nuns and told them, "Sisters, last night our Lord Jesus appeared to me and told me that he was coming back to our earth, but not as a Jewish carpenter, but as a Hindu outcast. He told me that he is coming as one of the people we are serving". From that moment on the sisters paid special attention to every person they served. They were solicitous to every dying man, woman and child. They loved all with deep compassion, and often would tell each other, "Our Lord is in our midst". Every child in need was their Lord. Every scared dying man was their Lord. Every hopeless woman was their Lord. Soon, the entire world took notice of their love and their devotion, and within a few years, the order grew to over 500 nuns and priests. As new novices or priests were accepted into the order, the older nuns and priests would tell them: "The Lord is among us, he is one of them, we treat all as though they are our Lord".

What a different model of leadership this is! How much we need this model of leadership today in our world! Our Church today, indeed our world, is filled with over-entitled, self-serving, egotistical, and dishonest leaders whose only concern is their own power and reputation. We live at a time in history when the wolves greedily feast on the sheep they were given to lead, to protect, to serve, and to love. Power is the thing today. Not service, but power. Not duty to God and country, but power. Not love and care for others, but power. Not respect and honor, but power. It has become our drug, our opioid of choice, and our reason for being. Many leaders do whatever needs to get done to obtain it, to grow it, to protect it, and keep it for themselves. This is particularly sad when the person is a church leader whose job it is to imitate Christ himself and to preach a Gospel of servanthood, love, and care for the least of those among us.

This is what Christ was trying so hard to teach his disciples. Lead through service, lead by loving others, lead by seeing my face reflected on the faces of all the people with whom you come into contact. Now, today, I tell you all: The Lord is among us. He is seating at your left and at your right. He is at home waiting for your return. He is in the grocery store, in the street, in the local hospital, at the nursing home, in the local jail and in the prison. He is the poor in need of your love, the isolated in need of your compassion, the misunderstood in need of your attention, and the depressed in need of your care. He is in the jaded and the addicted; the divorced and the grieving person who just lost her spouse; he is the child in need of acceptance and support; he is the unwanted in search of your healing touch. He is among us today, here and now.

Let us pray that God will give us the ability to see him today, and to lead through servant ministry. In Jesus Name, Amen!