

Mark 9:30-37 ³⁰ Then they departed from there and passed through Galilee, and He did not want anyone to know it. ³¹ For He taught His disciples and said to them, "The Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of men, and they will kill Him. And after He is killed, He will rise the third day." ³² But they did not understand this saying, and were afraid to ask Him. ³³ Then He came to Capernaum. And when He was in the house He asked them, "What was it you disputed among yourselves on the road?" ³⁴ But they kept silent, for on the road they had disputed among themselves who would be the greatest. ³⁵ And He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all." ³⁶ Then He took a little child and set him in the midst of them. And when He had taken him in His arms, He said to them, ³⁷ "Whoever receives one of these little children in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me, receives not Me but Him who sent Me."

STAND UPRIGHT AND UNDERSTAND - GREAT IS THE ONE WHO SERVES

If you were to take a trek through the South Eastern part of Israel, after walking through miles of desert wilderness, you would eventually come to a lake. But if you happened to be thirsty from your long hike, that lake wouldn't do you any good. The dead sea in Southern Israel has such a high concentration of salt that you can literally simply float along in it, with out any effort, or so I'm told. I've never tried it myself. This may sound like fun, but there is a serious problem here. Imagine a piece of wood about 5 feet long with another ½ a foot of metal attached to the end. Now take that wood down to the river and place it in the water, it would float, certainly, but I don't care how you put it into the water, that piece of wood in no time is going to be floating along straight up and down with the metal under water.

The same principle applies to the human body and since the head is the heaviest part of the body, unless you can breathe through your toes, you are going to have real problems, if you try to float in the Dead Sea.

By the same token we are going to have a huge problem floating upright when we allow our heads to be stuffed full of the knowledge of this world and our own greatness. The phrase big-headedness is really a very appropriate description of us. In to the head comes all kinds of prideful thoughts: "Your not such a bad guy." "Yep, last month I stopped and said hello to some miserable bedraggled beggar." "I go to church every Sunday, that's pretty good." "I'm married to the prettiest girl around, certainly I am something special." Or in my case, "I know Hebrew, and Greek, I know the Bible, everyone sits relatively still on Sunday for half an hour, just to listen to me." We love to grab hold of these ideas and stuff them into our head. And slowly our head expands and before we know it we are floating upside down, unable to breath spiritually, unable to hear Christ, because our big head is surrounded by the sin filled water of this world. This of course only makes matters worse, because while we are sinking straight down we believe that we are rising farther and farther above all other men, and we praise ourselves for being such great people, such great Christians.

This is the position that we find the disciples in, in our text this morning. Immediately preceding our text three of the disciples had been chosen by Jesus to accompany Him to the top of a mountain, were they experienced a magnificent event. The Lord Jesus Christ been transformed and had shone like the sun. Meanwhile the rest of the disciples were down below the

mountain proving just how much they thought of themselves by attempting to cast out a demon, without God's help, without praying.

The Lord now needs to shovel this nonsense out their heads so they can float up right and understand the true nature of greatness in the Church of God.

I had a friend who was in the army and we were chatting about how he was different now that he had been in the service for a few years. One of the things that struck me, was the fact that he said he couldn't stand to have to repeat things to people. He said in the army you are told once and you had better listen because they won't tell you a second time. And he had gotten used to that and expected it of other people now too.

My sister who is married has a simliar problem with her husband, she complains to me that Jason never listens to anything she says or at least never remembers it. To which Jason replies that if she wouldn't talk for hours on end about nothing, maybe he would listen to her when she had something important to say.

These are but a few examples of how people don't listen or don't remember or just don't bother to do what they hear, but you notice this is nothing like what the disciples were facing, it wasn't simply a matter of Jesus having to repeat this over and over because the disciples kept forgetting. It wasn't a matter of the disciples tuning Him out and not listening to what He was saying. This was a matter of their being *unable* to understand, to comprehend His message. This was a real problem for them. How many times had Jesus explained to them that He was going to die and then rise from the dead again? It is a pretty simple statement, yet the disciples don't understand and they are afraid to ask Jesus?

The disciples don't understand. They can't perceive what Christ is talking about because, their heads are to filled with visions of their own glory. They are too busy counting the number of mansions that will be theirs when Christ becomes king to stop and think for a moment perhaps Christ is telling us He is not that type of king. And if that thought ever occurred to them even for a second, if even for a minute the idea entered their brains: Maybe Christ is telling us He is actually going to die. Maybe His words do not have a hidden meaning. Maybe His kingdom is not of this world, if that thought crept through their minds at all, they chased it out immediately as a loathsome idea they did not want to consider.

Christ however, is about to give them an object lesson in what it means to be great in His kingdom. He does this not necessarily just because they need to be humbled, although certainly they did. But more important than that is that if they were not humbled, if they were not turned right side up they would not be able to understand, they would not be able to see, how great, how beautiful this simple message was, the Son of Man came to serve men. God himself descended from on high to bring salvation to all men through His own humble death. And with out this message they were all lost, with out this knowledge, the great service of God, they were all doomed. Most especially I think Christ had Judas in mind with this message, Judas who would never learn to understand this, but would remain upside in his own selfish thoughts; who would drown in pride.

But let us not make the mistake of thinking that we are better than the apostles that we don't have the problem of our pride turning us upside down so that we cannot understand, how great is this one who came to serve us. Indeed we have a serious problem with doing exactly this. For the devil loves to inflate the prideful thoughts of our heads so that we too remain upside down drowning. It starts with these simple words: I would never do that! Or I have never done

that! Look around at all these people sitting with you in church. You know them, some you know better than others. But, I am willing to guess, you know them all fairly well. And if you don't know them you still have some kind of an idea, based on fact or fiction, of what type of people they are.

And when we have these ideas we pick through them one by one until we find something that separates me from him. Sometimes we don't have to pick very long, sometimes we have to virtually make it up. But then that dreaded statement comes into our minds, that idea, "I have never/ I would never do that." You see we look for something bad in other people so that we can tell ourselves that we are better. Now this is the sin of pride and is a sin. Since it is a sin it condemns us before the law. Yet Christ has paid the price of our sin and not even this sin can condemn us when we stand in Christ. And so the real danger here is not simply the fact that such a thought is a sin, but where this seemingly little sin always leads. Christ is no longer the Savior of me the chief of sinners. No, now, He is the Savior of me the one who is not quite as bad as that other people. And now Satan has really gotten us into trouble, worse than the fact that we are arrogant, all Satan now needs us to do is commit one sin, one small sin. Then he takes that sin and as if it were a sharp sword he pierces us through the heart with it. He convicts us of the evilness of that sin, and now all of a sudden we have no Savior left. Since we had in our own minds made Jesus the Savior, not of the ultimate sinner, but the Savior of the one who was better than everyone else, now that we are the ultimate sinner we have no Savior left. If I know that I am a Christian because look at those other people, and look how good I am in comparison, then I know nothing. Satan will trip me up and when he does I am not left with any type of Savior. When I fall down below those who I presume cannot be Christians because look at what they do, then all of a sudden I cannot be a Christian either.

Pride therefore blinds us to the knowledge of the true greatness of the one who came to serve us. It blinds us to the fact that Christ died on the cross for the ultimate sinner, for King Herod, for Emperor Nero, for Jeffery Dommer, yes even for those pilots who purposely crashed into the world trade center towers. It is only when we swallow our pride that we are able to see and understand that yes Christ died for the greatest of sinners, of whom I chief. And then Satan cannot touch us. No sin can ever torment us again. There is no accusation that can stand against us, for every one of those sins is taken care of in Christ's death and resurrection.

The disciples were attempting to claim glory, to boast really in who they were. Peter, James and John were undoubtedly saying, "look we saw the Lord transfigured. He chose us to see this awesome event. Obviously the Lord thinks that we are something special." I don't know what the other disciples came back with, what they used to attempt to prove they were greater, but human imagination is very good at coming up with things like that when the occasion demands it. So I am sure that the other nine disciples all had reasons for concluding they were greater. The point is the Lord comes along and he lets them know, you are floating upside down. You are looking at every thing the wrong way. **The first shall be last.** These people that you think are the greatest they are really the least and these people that you think are the lowliest they are really the greatest. Now in order to show the disciples just how far this went, just truly how far they ought to humble themselves, He calls a little child. He sets that child right in the middle of them. And He tells them in no uncertain terms that the one who welcomes a child such as this in my name, he is the greatest in heaven.

Jesus is not saying that you ought to simply go up to the child and shake it hand say hi and move on. When Jesus says that we ought to welcome a little child, that implies a responsibility. That means that you feed it and cloth it and give it a place to sleep and cloths to wear. That you take care of it. That you in fact love it and give it everything that it needs.

I guarantee you these words were no sooner out of His mouth than the disciples were thinking, but that's women's work. And that is exactly Christ's point. Yes it is a mother's work that Christ is talking about. And what does Christ say about that work. He exalts it to the highest position. The work of a mother, raising and caring for children, bringing them up in the fear and admonition of the Lord, that service, when it is done in connection with the name of Jesus, that is when it is done out of love for him, that work is beyond and more precious to our God than the mightiest acts of the apostle, the most powerful miracles by the prophets. When Elijah stood on the top of Mount Carmel and called down fire from heaven to prove that the Lord God alone was God and there was no other beside him, that act was not as great as a mother bringing up a single child to know his Savior.

But what has our society done? They have degraded, laughed at, and abhorred this most precious of all tasks. They claim they have liberated women. They claim that it is a new age when women will no longer be kept as slaves in the home. But they are floating upside down, they cannot see correctly. And they have taken from themselves the most glorious position they could ever hold. The society in Jesus' time was no different. No one would have thought twice about a mother raising her children, the men of Christ time left it to the women as a task that was beneath them. But Jesus shows the disciples this most lowly of all tasks that you think is so far beneath you, that task in the kingdom of heaven is the most glorious. And those who do it out of love for Him, will be the most honored.

And the lesson does not stop there it is applicable to every small task, every work that the world thinks insignificant. The world does not care about the missionary over in Africa, the world does not think very highly of those who give their time and money to the service of the Church. In fact the world does not think very highly about the Church at all.

The apostle Paul in our scripture reading this morning states that he will glory in his afflictions. Because somehow through his afflictions greater glory is given to the Lord. In his afflictions is the work of the Lord better accomplished. This is definitely not anything the world would boast about, or glory in.

In what do you glory? Do you take pride in your house? Do you show off your wardrobe? Do you give yourself a pat on the back for your own elegance and style, your beautiful vacation home or comfortable car? Do you pride your self on any of these while the work of the Lord is being held back by your unwillingness to serve, your unwillingness to serve with you time and with your money? Shame on you and shame on me too, for far too often have I also shruken back form being the first to serve. Far better, far far better would it be if today I saw nothing in front of me but worn and faded clothing, on the backs of those who gave everything to the service of the Lord, then if I saw gloriously arrayed individuals who have no time and no money for the work of the Lord. There is nothing wrong, with vacations and beautiful houses and well dressed individuals, if the Lord has blessed you with such gifts, praise His name and enjoy His gifts with thanksgiving. There is something horribly wrong with men who ignore the needs of their church, because their heads are drowning in their own pride, the pride of their possessions. Because they spend their time and money on their own comfort and pride rather than on the work of the Lord. Because they think they need a new car or a new boat of a new TV.

Learn with the disciples the great the wonderful news of how great is He who came to serve us, who loved me the sinner, and standing up straight give glory to God, by thinking first and foremost of what you can give to His work. Because He has given you so much, can you not give him but a little? In the cross of Christ we glory. And seeing that great service which He rendered to us we delight to serve him, with the first and the best of all we have.

Six weeks is not such a very long time, and certainly it seems like it has flown by. At the same time however, that first day when I met Pastor Wilke at the camp in Western Michigan, and began my service here as a vicar, seems to be a long time ago. Perhaps simply because so much has happened in the mean time. But I leave tomorrow and in the time that follows, if you look back and remember me, I hope it is only as a voice proclaiming the Word of God, for that is all that I wish to be. However you remember me though I leave you with this Word from our God. Thus says the Lord, who never lies, **“For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.”** Glory, therefore, in the suffering, in the work that the Lord has given to you, so that His plans may be accomplished among you. In the blessing of the Lord I leave you, may He ever grant wisdom and understanding to your Pastors, and may He increase in the hearts of everyone of you the love of Christ to serve Him with gladness. Great is He who has served us and does even now serve His Church, and greatly is His name to be praised, now and forever more. Amen