

Sermon on Mark 9:30-37
16th Sunday after Pentecost, September 20, 2009
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Let me begin by telling you a little story. It's about a father and a mother who had two sons, one daughter, and three cars. They were good children – good students, good drivers, who respected their parents – and the cars were good, reliable cars – not junkers. But the parents had come to the point where they wanted to make a lifestyle change, and get rid of the family automobiles. So they called the family together and made an announcement: that the two of them were no longer going to drive to work, but take public transportation – and because they lived in an urban neighborhood where everything they needed was within walking distance, they had no more need for all these cars – so they were going to get rid of them – except for maybe one. They had a Porche, a mini-van, and a Corolla. After dinner the kids stayed at the table and continued talking while mom and dad went into the kitchen to clean up and wash dishes. (There's something wrong with this picture already, isn't there!) Anyway, as the parents finished up, they heard their children's voices rising louder in the dining room, but they couldn't hear what they were saying. So when they came back into the dining room where their sons and daughter were, the dad asked them, "What were you talking about when we were in the kitchen?" Silence. Nobody said a word at first. Finally, their daughter spoke up, "Uh, Dad, we were talking about this....since you and Mom want to get rid of the cars, we were talking about who gets which car. Who among us gets the best one? The boys were arguing loudly over the Porche! So which one of us is the best driver – who should get the Porche?" Their parents sighed and said, "We love you all, and we all want the best for you. But we're going to get rid of all the cars – except for maybe one that we can share – probably the minivan. Nobody gets their own car! We're giving them up! Have you listened to a word that we have said?"

Nope, the kids had not been listening – at least not well enough. They heard something about cars, and the thought of getting rid of their cars had not sunk in! They still thought like any other red-blooded American kid thinks: which car do I get, and how can I get the best possible car for myself! The "gospel" their parents were trying to share with them (that life would be better if they got rid of two cars they didn't need) just did not compute! They listened, but did not hear. And so they did not understand.

Jesus had the same problem with his disciples (though Jesus wasn't talking about cars!). He taught his disciples about the kingdom of God, and shared with them how he, the Son of Man would be betrayed and killed by human beings, and

on the third day rise again. They may have heard him – they were there when he said these words – but they did not understand what he was saying, and were afraid to ask. Somehow what Jesus said to his disciples didn't sink in. Could it be that Jesus has the same problem with you and me?

Mark's gospel says that after Jesus said these words, they walked on to Capernaum until they came to the house where they were staying for the night. He had heard them talking among themselves as they walked along the road – and the discussion must have gotten quite heated. So Jesus asked them, "What were you guys arguing about on the way?" But they were silent. Why? Because they had argued with one another over who was the greatest. Jesus must have heard them, because he called the Twelve to sit down and gather round, and said this: *"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."*

Then Jesus did something truly remarkable. There must have been several women and children in the household, the women doing their tasks and the children playing, not part of the discussion, but there. Jesus took one of those little children, brought her into the center of the circle with him, and took her in his arms. "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." Namely, God.

Wow. That ended the argument over who was greatest right there. Jesus had turned everything upside down, and changed the conversation from who was the greatest or who was next in line to who was willing to serve – and place their priority on welcoming children and women into the circle.

Jesus had tried to make his disciples understand what he was about by leveling with them about what the future held for him and for them. For him it was betrayal and the cross – humiliation and death – not power, glory, and honor. If they believed that he was the Messiah sent by God to save the people, they had to understand that "the people" went beyond Israel to include the whole world, and that the means of salvation would not be by a victorious army but by Jesus' willingness to give up his life for the sake of the world. To follow Jesus meant to follow his example of service, of giving up rather than taking life, in order to save it. This was impossible for the disciples to understand. It was too much, too soon. So they continued to talk and act in the same old way, seeking privilege and power by their attachment to Jesus, thinking that the most loyal should receive the first fruits. Jesus had to start over with words they understood. So he talked about a cross instead of a throne, and put before them a child in place of power and position. A cross and a child – two metaphors for the work of God's Kingdom. God's Messiah would come to earth as a child, and die on a cross. Those who follow him must also carry their cross in life, and welcome a child as they would welcome God into their midst. That's what Jesus is saying to you and me today. Are you listening? Have we heard what he has said?

I propose today that we are in the position today of the disciples, sitting at Jesus' feet in the house in Capernaum (though we happen to be in St. Paul). Jesus has told us the good news of what he has done and is going to do, and inviting you and me to follow him. We have actually more information than the disciples did, because we have even heard the good news of Easter! We have heard the story of Jesus betrayal, suffering and death, and that he rose again on the third day. We have been baptized and heard the promise that now we are all children of God, called to follow Jesus. Many of us have made promises, making affirmation of our baptism and our faith. But ever since we heard and said these words, we have been arguing amongst ourselves along the way – as we have gone through life.

How is that so? Well, maybe if you and I had a tape recording of all the words that we have ever said, or all our thoughts over the years were written down, we would see how this is so. But let's consider what all the fuss is about in all our churches over the years. For centuries Christian denominations have argued over who has the truth of the gospel, and which Church is most "Christ-like". Some Lutherans may think that we have a gospel that Roman Catholics haven't heard, while the some Romans think they are the true Church! (Some Lutherans think that they are better Lutherans than other Lutherans, while some are just a little better than average!) Some Pentecostals may think they have the Holy Spirit, that we don't have. Some Baptists may think that they are best because they have "believer's baptism" and livelier "gospel" music, while some Lutherans think infant baptism best shows God's grace, and that our hymns have better theology and are older (and so have lasted the test of time!). New churches may think they are better because they have new people, while older churches place value in time-honored traditions. So who is the best? I don't know! Is that really the question? That's not what Jesus is interested in – Jesus is interested in saving the world by sharing the good news of God's love. That can be done in any number of ways, and he needs all kinds of churches to do it, for all the varieties and numbers of people who listen and learn in various ways.

Beyond the churches and denominations, on a personal level, many of us rate ourselves in faith, comparing ourselves as "better" Christians or "worse" than others, depending on how much we pray, or read the Bible or how we understand it. We may think we're not good enough to come to Bible study or to worship in a church, because our lives do not measure up. Or we compare ourselves with others and think that we know quite a lot, and are a step ahead of other Christians, and so we are God's favorites. We would never, ever, EVER SAY SO – but deep in our hearts, don't you know it's true? We compare ourselves with others all the time, until we become aware of it (and read scripture passages like this), and realize that Jesus shows us a better way! But left to our own devices, we are like the disciples, arguing amongst ourselves over who is the greatest, the closest to God's truth.

But today Jesus reminds us of the cross upon which he died in order to cure us from all this arguing over nothing, trying to be best, and lording it over one another. It took Jesus' death to make this message clear, and we have been repeating this message over and over in the Church for 2000 years trying to understand it and to live it. Sometimes we get it. Most of the time we don't.

So today Jesus puts a little child in front of us. A child who is young, doesn't know much yet, who is vulnerable and left out of decision-making power. But a child who is able to love, who is eager to learn, who likes to play and to laugh, whose potential is without limit. Welcome this child, and you welcome me into your life, and your church. Sometimes this child is you – for once upon a time you and I all were children – and once in a while we are placed in the position of a child: vulnerable, powerless and new. Jesus told us once to “become like a little child, for to such as these the Kingdom of God belongs.” But most of all, welcome the little child in Jesus' name, for when we do this, we cannot be arguing amongst ourselves over who is the greatest! So as we in the Church clarify our priorities for witness and service, let's not forget Jesus' priority as he put it so clearly before us: Let us welcome each and every child of God in Jesus' name, for when we welcomes even one such child we welcome Christ, and not only welcome Jesus, but we welcome God the Father who sent him.” Thanks be to God for such clear direction. Amen.