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First Presbyterian Church, Willmar, MN
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Mark 9: 30-37
"So You Wanna be First?"

30 They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; ³¹for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, 'The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.' ³²But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

33 Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?' ³⁴But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. ³⁵He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.' ³⁶Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'

I want you remember someone. I want you to remember a leader who you have known who was truly great. Someone who always putting others above him or herself. Someone who walked into a room and treated everyone the same. Someone who didn't care if you were the mayor or the streetcleaner, they treated you with dignity and respect. Someone who wasn't afraid to roll up their sleeves and get in the trenches alongside the everyday worker. Someone who you respected, because they respected you. They respected their role. They respected their office of leadership, because they knew that they were called to serve, not just lead. Someone who didn't lord it over others, but knew that we were all in it together.

OK, now do you have someone in mind? Now how exceptional is that person? How uncommon to find those traits, isn't it? Maybe you've looked at the decline in way we conduct national politics, and you've seen the character of our leaders decline in the last generation, and maybe, like myself, you find yourself

wishing there were more leaders like you've just recalled or imagined here in my thought exercise this morning.

I find the juxtaposition of the two vignettes in today's passage to be especially odd and poignant. Jesus has just finished telling the disciples that he has to be handed over into human hands, who will kill him, and then, after three days, he will rise again. When, only a short time later they come to a rest in their travels and he has to scold them, because, of all things, they've been arguing over who is the greatest amongst them. I mean, how bizarre can it be, that Jesus has just told them how the Son of Man will be humiliated with an ignoble death – that he must walk willingly into a sacrificial mission to fulfil his purpose – and these foolish men are arguing about who's going to be the greatest! It's really absurd isn't it?

It's almost as if they've missed the point, don't you think? Like they've been following Jesus for three years, and they still think that this whole disciple thing has been grooming them to assume high office in a political cabinet. As if Jesus, when he's going to assume office as the new King of Jerusalem and Israel, is going to install a cabinet, and place Peter as Secretary of State, and Mark as Secretary of the Treasury, and Andrew as Vice-President. We know that this is and was an absurd notion. But what sort of mission did the disciples think Jesus was on? Clearly, they were missing the point. He'd just told them that he was on a mission to the cross, and that had gone right over their heads.

But the mission isn't always obvious is it? I was impressed by a couple of recent events that the character and mission of a leader are critically important to turn the course of history, and that a few small decisions can make alter a nation's history. Recently Leanne and I took our family to Washington DC and colonial Williamsburg. I was reminded numerous times on that just how fragile is our republic.

Take the Revolutionary War for instance. The outcome of this was in question from day one, and we were most certainly the underdogs. Only through a sequence of unlikely events and the tenacity of the Colonial Army under the leadership of General Washington during some grim moments like the winter at Valley Forge did the revolution endure. And when they finally saw through to victory over the British the first of a few crucial moments came to be: That being

the fact that General Washington could very well have parlayed his popularity and his command of an army of devoted troops who he'd seen through thick and thin into a dictatorship with himself as ruler of the Colonies. A King of America, if you will. But he didn't. He resigned his commission as commander-in-chief of the Continental Army in 1783, and joined the general populace, because he was committed to the ideals of the new republic he helped to found. Only to be elected unanimously to the office of President for two terms.

The second crucial moment being, when after two terms as the nation's first president, President Washington chose to step down. Through no compulsion, rather than his own conscience, he elected to return to Mount Vernon as a gentleman farmer in retirement from public life. With his still monumental popularity, he could have chosen to become president for life. He refused that path.

It's because, as I believe, and others have copiously written, and that President Washington stated in his farewell address in September of 1796, that he served a cause greater than himself, something that he had fought for and sacrificed for, and he wished to see it endure beyond himself. He understood that he had held his office in order to serve others and to serve his country. So, he chose to set an example for the peaceful passage of executive power from one president to the next. It's an example that our nation has observed ever since. He set the tone. He blazed the trail. We can all be grateful for this.

Maybe in his heart of hearts, President Washington understood what it meant when Jesus taught his disciples, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." That to be great, one must serve. To have a lasting positive impact, one must look to the needs of others above our own.

As much as we might pine for a George Washington to reemerge in national politics, the challenge of Christ for us in today's message isn't just for great leaders in charge of thousands of men, or national budgets of millions of dollars. It's a challenge for each of us. It's the challenge of everyday, ordinary, discipleship - following Jesus day in and day out.

Because this text is about discipleship. Meaning, it's about what it means to be a follower of Jesus. The day to day life of commitments we make as we chose to either go Christ's way, or our own way.

Because the temptation of the life of faith is to make everything about us. To make this experience all about what we can get out of it. We find ourselves looking to what we can extract from the experience, what is self-gratifying, and what in this life can bring us popularity or power - To jockey for position and influence. We're no better than the disciples whispering behind Jesus' back about who is the greatest among us.

And if that is the case, then we have some work to do. We need to recognize those tendencies in ourselves. Be frank and realistic about their existence in our lives and then we need to confess them to Christ and seek forgiveness. For if we're using the Church to look good, feel good, consolidate power, or use the church to gain power over the world for our own means or gratification, we've forsaken the path of true discipleship.

So what do we do? We have to follow the path of Jesus. He set the example for us. It's the path marveled at by Paul who says it this way in Philippians 2:

³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, ⁷but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, ⁸he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.”

What Paul is saying, is that Jesus was obedient to God, emptying himself, in order to serve humanity. His life and mission was always about others: healing

them, exorcising their demons, teaching them, discipling them, encouraging them, leading them. Our challenge is that we need to make his ways our ways. We need to follow the path of our Rabbi: seeking to heal the world's wounds like him, teaching his message, encouraging them with his good news, and doing this all as his servants. Not because we're great, but because the one we serve is great, and because we've been called to serve and to love in his name.

Jesus uses a little child to illustrate. In his day, the child had no legal status, the child was property of his or her parent, and had not public voice. There was not status to gain in serving or welcoming a child. There was no greatness to be had in serving or welcoming a child. But, nonetheless, Jesus points to loving a child in his name as a true path to greatness.

So, I ask you this morning: What path are you following? Is it the way of the world and the way of the self? Or is there another path you're feeling called to follow this morning? The path that puts others first, that looks to the needs of the hungry, the homeless, and the least of these – the path of Jesus? It's a path that began on a dusty road first trod by a Jewish rabbi in the deserts of Palestine 2000 years ago? But it continues through the ages to this place and this time, and onwards. It's the path of true discipleship. May we follow him.

Alleluia and Amen.