

September 19, 2021
Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost

“The Needy”

Mark 9:30-37

“If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.”

On an average day this is a really, really tough teaching of Christ for us to swallow. We have a diabolical sinful nature that wants to put ourselves first, exalt ourselves, often right in the face of God Himself! But even if, by God’s grace and the power of the Holy Spirit, we get past that evil tendency we still have the measure and reason of the world which says we do have rights, we do have standing, we do have social ranking that puts us above others, makes us someone to be served, or at least not have us lowered to serve others...especially certain others.

And now we most certainly are not in average days. We are victims afflicted by a hurricane and a whole slew of personal needs have presented themselves. Especially in those first days when the shingles were off, the yard was a mess, the power and water were absent, we were thinking “I need, I need, I need.” And in a way this is a temptation toward evil—a temptation to say “I am the greatest because my need is great. I must be served and others must take a place below me and my need!”

Now I don’t believe Christ’s words here mean Christians are required to be doormats, that you have to let everyone in line at the Walmart and gas station get in front of you. God has made you a steward of your home, your family and your own self and you are to care for these rightly. But this does mean that we do not embrace an attitude of “every man for himself” and “I’ve got mine, let them get theirs.” We look to love others and we love by serving, by filling a genuine need that we’re able to fill when God places it in our path.

And we do this willingly, even eagerly, in reaction to how wonderfully we have been served.

It’s almost laughable how badly the disciples missed out on what Jesus was all about. He is the Messiah clearly telling them the manner in which He is going to serve, *“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”* but they totally miss it and instead strike up a conversation about which one of them is the greatest.

But we know. Jesus is the greatest; divine Son of God in glory and majesty willingly dying for the rightfully damned humanity standing in rebellion against their Creator. His is the greatest service ever rendered for no other reason than *God so loved the world*. His is the greatest service ever rendered to you, yes you, personally you. He saved you from an infernal eternity apart from God and restores you to where you were Created to be—God’s holy presence.

Living in that truth, yeah, be eager to love and to serve.

But there is a very strange and weird vibe to the English translation of this passage when Jesus takes a little child up in His arms and says, *“Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.”*

You see, we usually hear this and take it as Jesus instructing us to, in His name, be receiving the little child. But the New Testament Greek pushes it the other way. The child is the one who is already in Christ’s name. Jesus goes on to describe such as “little ones who believe in me” so it’s pretty obvious Jesus is talking about serving believers—those who are in Christ. And this gives us another reason not to get too full of ourselves and our own need and our own lives—the people who need us may in fact be Jesus Christ—the body of Christ—His church.

And I don't want you to jump right to—so Christians help other Christians. I mean, yes, that is very scripturally true. We do especially have an obligation to help our brothers and sisters in the faith.

But before you go there, consider, can you know the heart of that random person you see who is in need? Can you see whether the Holy Spirit is working in their heart? Can you see saving faith, be it great or small? You can't. So the people you meet who are in need, they might be a little one in Christ, no matter how things may seem otherwise. And the way you receive them may serve to build them up or crush them in that faith. So the only safe way to receive them is with the love of Christ—you know, in the same manner in which you have been loved by Christ; as a servant.

And lest you think I'm declaring some kind of legal requirement from Jesus, pay attention to the Gospel truth Jesus proclaims here: "*Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.*" The child is in Christ's name and thus in Christ and thus in the Father who sent Christ—God in them and them in God! And who is it that is in Christ's name—not just the child, but you! You are blessed to be baptized into Christ's name. Yes, you are the servant but you are also the child!

Especially at a time like this we need to remember this truth. As you find yourself in this devastation thinking "I need, I need, I need," Jesus is hearing you and Jesus is caring for you because Jesus is in you and you are in Him—a child in His name. You can see this in the material world as the lineman, retail workers, insurance adjustors and all the others are springing into action and fulfilling their God-given vocations that see to the restoration and normalization of this earthly life. And as He always has, the Holy Spirit does this for your spiritual being, lifting you up by the Gospel Word of salvation right now, and feeding you forgiveness in Christ's body and blood.

Yes, you need. Most of us need all sorts of stuff right now regarding our property and/or our livelihood. Some of us have been needy for a while regarding our health or family situation or other affliction. Many stand in need of peace and comfort in mind and spirit, struggling with all manner of anxiousness and uncertainty in the midst of a fallen world. And I can't promise that you will in this life ever get to a point where those needs are fully resolved—again, fallen world.

But Jesus has completely served you to meet your greatest need—reconciliation with your God and Creator. In Christ you stand made fit for God's presence and dwell there this very moment, now as through a glass dimly, but soon in completeness in glory. By faith you can weather all of the losses and needs of this life, because you stand already delivered into the next in and with Jesus Christ who has completed the journey already—the firstfruits of God's children.

So service is not a burden. The truth is that service is more than a privilege. It is our nature, because we have been made to be the body of Christ—the eternal king—who serves perfectly in love. By faith we who are indeed needy receive His gifts, and thus receive Him in the needy children of the world He sends before us.

Amen.