

September 15, 2024  
Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost

“Crossing the Line”

Mark 9:30-37

There is a diagram I’ve been taught and that I have used for many years as a pastor. It is this simple upside-down “T”, a vertical line and a horizontal line. At the top of the vertical line is God above; at the bottom is the believer. We look up to God; God looks down on us. God is greater than us, we are much lesser than God. Easy-peasy.

The horizontal line is akin to you and I looking around us and seeing all the other people in the world. They also are under God and much lesser than God, all of us being the human creatures of God’s creation.

There are many ways to use this diagram. It can describe the two types of righteousness. Before God none is righteous because we all sin, and sin condemns. Before one another there is ranking of righteousness because murdering somebody and stealing a pack of gum are very different offenses. There is the two realms understanding—as believers redeemed by the blood of Christ we function as saints in the kingdom of heaven and members of Christ’s body, the church. Yet here on earth we’re also citizens of the world, living and interacting with all people, believers and non-believers and holding any number of earthly vocations.

However today I’d like us to consider this diagram in light of what Jesus teaches about discipleship in our Gospel reading, *“If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.”*

You see, as believers we really don’t have a problem with this chart. We’re good with the vertical. We know God is God and we are not. While we of course have this age-old problem in our sin of raising up ourselves or things of this world to the point of idolatry, we come back to our senses, recognize our stupidity and repent to God, begging forgiveness for the sake of Christ—who is God for us. We humble ourselves before Him, even doing so physically here as we kneel in confession or at the rail in the Sacrament of the Altar.

And we’re good with the horizontal also. We know we’re all God’s created creatures, afflicted by sin as we are. We’re good with live and let live. We serve our neighbors in our varied vocations, and though maybe at times we trip ourselves up in that selfish ambition St. James condemns in his epistle, again, we come to our senses and repent, try to do better. We do our thing, others do their thing, and more or less we try to go along and get along. We together as a community work to fight evil and injustice and address the needs and ills of our society, but basically we live our life and let others live theirs.

But Jesus’ teaching of discipleship today really messes things up, doesn’t it? We’re okay with being down here on the same level as everybody else, but Jesus calls for a lot more than that, or maybe I should say a lot less. Jesus describes the ones who would be great in His kingdom to *“be last of all and servant of all.”* This is not just a teaching that is hard to swallow. To our fallen human nature this is downright offensive.

Humbling ourselves before God in service to Him? Sure! That sounds right and good, after all, He is the Creator and the God of our salvation. He deserves it.

But humbling ourselves before others in service to them? I mean, hold on a minute there! They’re just a bunch of sinners walking around on this same horizontal line as I am. Sure, maybe I’ll give them common courtesy. Maybe I will even serve them if there is some societal reason to do so, like I’m hosting a dinner party or, you know, they’re paying me to do so. And yes, of

course if they are in desperate need and I can help, I'm all in for that circumstance. But "servant of all"? No. Some, I'm not called to their service. Some, they don't deserve my service. And let's face it; some tasks are simply beneath me. There's a line, and you can only expect me to go so low.

Well, let's take a look at that line according to Christ. The Son of God comes down and fully assumes our humanity, and then Jesus, the servant of all, humbles Himself not only to immense physical suffering on a cross, but to becoming the curse of sin under the wrath of God for all mankind there. And He dies, lowering Himself into the grave for us. When Jesus calls on His followers to "be last of all and servant of all" He is not calling us to anything other than what He has done for all. Jesus came down and out of steadfast love and in perfect obedience to the Father, crosses the line, for all.

This teaching is for His disciples, those who would follow Christ. This teaching is for you and for me. And it is a hard teaching to accept.

And it doesn't get any easier as Jesus brings that little child into the midst of them and says, "*Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.*"

Children in first-century Israel, while loved by their families, were also considered the weakest, most vulnerable, most no-account and kind of useless in society. If there is a ranking on the horizontal line, they're the lowest rung. As Jesus does several places in the Gospels, He is saying that the weakest and most in need of our loving service are the ones we should be serving, for His sake. Jesus esteems sinners in their great need and serves them, we are called to esteem and serve the lowly also, not showing partiality toward the affluent and those who might return service to us.

How does this tough teaching play out then in our earthly lives? On one level, probably not well. We may not be overt snobs, but we get real comfortable living our lives and looking past, and maybe even down upon, a bunch of the "lessers" in society. And it may not even be looking down at—we just get really busy and loaded with responsibilities...and we kind of just don't see them because there are other things that need to get done.

On the other hand, I do see a lot of love being given in a lot of ways among you, the people of God. When needs have arisen, within our little congregation and from the greater community at large, many have responded with volunteering hours, bringing food or other needed stuff, or simply opening up your wallets for whatever the cause may be. Thanks be to the Holy Spirit upon you, giving you a servant heart.

The exhortation for you today from Christ is not to humble yourselves and get to work serving others. That would be the law forcing you into obedience.

The exhortation for you today is to joyfully follow Christ where He has led you by His own loving work for you. He humbled Himself from glory to come to you, save you, by crossing that line because you needed Him to do so. He loves you, so He did.

Having received that love, we follow in His wake, loving Him by loving others, whom He also loves. We struggle against our fallen nature to put this into practice physically, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually, because we know His steadfast love is true.

And we know where following His love leads. Those who follow Christ don't focus on the horizontal line. We may live there for the moment, but our destination is the life to which Christ rose that first Easter Sunday. We are willing to humble ourselves below it, because the Gospel truth is we stand baptized into the vertical, the Christ who is now the first, the greatest, the King who reigns forever, and we are following in His love unto His eternal glory. Amen.