

# Servants of All

Mark 9:30-37

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

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We are continuing in our fall series on Mark, following Jesus around, seeing what he's saying and doing and what it might mean for us all these years later.

Our passage this morning has two sections. We're going to spend more on the second than the first.

The first one is Jesus predicting that he will suffer and that he will die. This is the second of three times he will do this in Mark. He does it in Mark 8 (as we saw last week), Mark 9, and Mark 10 (which will be the prelude to our text on October 20).

So, Jesus is not exactly hiding where this whole story is going.

Each of these three predictions of Jesus is marked by failure on the part of the disciples in how they respond.

In Mark 8, Peter rebukes Jesus for saying such a thing (we saw this last Sunday). And is in turn rebuked by Jesus!

In Mark 9 (today's reading) we see that the disciples are just confused. They don't know what he's talking about but they're afraid to say anything (perhaps they aren't anxious to be called "Satan," like Peter was!).

In Mark 10, we encounter perhaps the *least* inspiring response. In a spectacular exercise in missing or ignoring the point (and not learning anything from the previous two occasions), James and John ask if they sit at Jesus' right and left hand when he comes in glory. We'll talk more about this one in a month or so.

Now, we should be careful about assuming that just because things take place back-to-back in our bibles, that this reflects precise chronology. Each of the gospel writers arrange

stories in certain ways for specific reasons (e.g., in John Jesus cleanses the temple very early, while in the other gospels, it comes at the end, in Holy Week).

But still. Mark seems to be pointing out a consistent theme in how Jesus' disciples responded to him talking about suffering and dying.

They weren't having it. They either don't get it or won't get it. Or both.

They had no interest in a suffering Messiah.

I wonder if we do today. We read these stories and it's easy for us to kind of shake our head knowingly at the disciples' obtuseness.

*How could they so willfully misunderstand him? How could they so tenaciously cling to their categories that Jesus was very deliberately and obviously upending? How could they be so thick?*

But how interested are we in a Saviour who suffers and dies? Who doesn't fit our expectations? Whose winning sometimes looks a lot more like losing?

Which brings us to the bulk of today's sermon.

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I want to talk about greatness.

Just over a year ago, I preached a sermon on the Beatitudes where I quoted a singer-songwriter named Jon Guerra. We had listened to one of his songs called "Kingdom of God" during the service (we had visuals of the beatitudes rotating on the screen while the song was playing).

My favourite lines of the song are these:

Blessed are the poor who have nothing to own  
Blessed are the mourners who are crying alone  
Blessed are the guilty who have nowhere to go

For their hearts have a road to the kingdom of God

And their souls are the songs of the kingdom of God  
And they will find a refuge, for theirs is the kingdom of God

It's a song that has become one of my most played over the last few years.

A few weeks ago, Guerra released a little three song EP. It seems that he, like so many people these days, is growing weary of the state of American politics (which is exported around the world).

Weary of the implicit values and power dynamics it normalizes. Weary of assumptions about what it means to be "great" and how we go about achieving it.

The songs are punchy, direct, blunt. I was particularly struck by the first song, which is called "American Gospel" which is a pretty much exact inversion of his earlier song "Kingdom of God."

I want to read you a few of the lyrics:

Blessed are the powerful  
Blessed are the rich  
Blessed are the merciless  
And the hypocrites  
They will inherit the empires passing  
It's the American Gospel

Blessed are the superstars  
Blessed are the famous  
Blessed are the ones  
Who make their faces ageless  
They will inherit the magazine covers  
Of the American Gospel...

Blessed are the speech police  
Fundamentalists  
Blessed are the rioters  
Raising clenching fists  
They will be filled with empathy for all  
Except their enemies...

Come to me, those who have something to give  
Come to me, those who are likely to win  
Come to me, those who are ruthless and proud of it, oh

Come pledge  
Come swear  
Come vote for the American Gospel  
Don't wait  
Come trade  
Your soul for the American Gospel

It's a fairly pointed critique!

Now, as you likely know by, I am not a political warrior. I do not wave a flag for any political party (in Canada, much less the USA).

But it seems to me that our cultural moment is dominated by the assumptions that Jon Guerra gives voice to in this song.

Our politics has devolved into childish screaming matches which essentially reduce to, “I am better than you, my party is better than yours, we are the only moral ones, the only smart ones, the only ones who care about the right things, and the rest of you are a steaming pile of wickedness and corruption.”

There is a lot of jostling and scrambling for power. The system (and we who support it) rewards the rich, the famous, the ones who will do and say whatever it takes to win.

And of course, none of this is a uniquely American phenomenon. It is true all over the world. We saw a few fairly uninspiring scenes in our own parliament this week.

I've said this before, and I will continue to say it. It grieves me that so many Christians—on the right and on the left, in the USA and in Canada and beyond—have allowed politics to become their religion.

Politics is where they look for meaning, for validation, for righteousness, for salvation.

I got another example of this just a few weeks ago.

I have been writing online for the better part of two decades. Mostly, this is on my blog, but occasionally I write for other magazines or publications, or they will pick up something from my blog and use it, etc.

It may surprise you to learn that occasionally I hear from people who aren't thrilled with something I've said. ☺

I recently got an email from someone who was “concerned” about something I had written on Mennonite identity.

They wondered if I might like to read a sermon they had recently preached, and they helpfully attached it to the email.

Well, I wasn't particularly interested. But I read the sermon. It did not have the effect that I imagine this person intended it to.

There were many aspects of the sermon I had questions about. But I was especially struck by a portion of the sermon where they *explicitly* stated that they could not understand how anyone who called themselves a Christian could vote for [party x].

How, I asked, could you say this? Could faithful Christians not have different political priorities, emphases, or concerns? Does *any* political party really map on to the politics of Jesus that obviously and straightforwardly? Should politics be the realm in which faithful Christians locate so much of their hope and their identity? Especially as Mennonites, a movement birthed out of strong convictions about the separation of church and state!

Our conversation did not progress much further.

Why am I talking so much about politics, you may quite rightly be wondering.

Well, again, each time Jesus predicts his passion—his suffering, his dying, his complete inversion of business as usual—his disciples make it plain that the Messiah they are looking for is a political one.

Their conceptions of greatness involve political power, probably military might, conquest, victory, vindication.

They love all the healings and the teachings (well, most of them, at least) and the way Jesus puts the powerful in their place, but mostly they seem to assume that it will be business as usual when it comes to what greatness looks like and how it is achieved.

They weren't at all interested in a winning that looked more like losing, in a "first" that looked more like "last."

They can't grasp that Jesus is changing the whole game. And so, despite the fact that Jesus has now told them twice about the path that he is taking, they're busy arguing about who's the greatest.

And Jesus famously responds, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all" (Mark 9:35).

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Sometimes Jesus says things that are hard to understand. He speaks in riddles, he makes references to the other parts of Scripture that aren't immediately obvious, he says things that provoke and bewilder and leave us scratching our heads.

Today is not one of those days. Jesus' teaching today is quite simple.

**You must change how you think about greatness.**

You must adopt a different posture to the norms you see around you about who is to be admired, who is to be praised, about what is worth pursuing and about how change comes about.

If you want to be great according to the logic of the kingdom of God, you must become servants of all.

Jesus knows this will not be easy. Old habits die hard. Sometimes *really* hard.

We have so many ways of ranking who's winning and who's losing in our world. Very few of them involve serving others. None of them involve being "last."

Even as Christians who seek to be formed by Jesus' teaching, it can be very tempting to adopt the assumptions of the culture around us.

To assume that bringing about the kingdom of God on earth as in heaven involves political influence and power.

To line up behind celebrity Christian leaders who sell the most books or pack out churches and conferences or amass all kinds of followers online.

To equate cultural influence and status with faithfulness.

It can be very easy to get trapped in the mentality that more power and influence is better.

Because even though we may *admire* Jesus' words, we don't really trust them.

We nod along to his words about those who want to be great needing to become servants and those want to be first assuming the lowest and the least positions.

This sounds very humble and admirable, and we very much like to think of ourselves that way, too.

But when it comes right down to it, we're still not eager for the kind of game-changing inversion of power and status that Jesus teaches and embodies (in his life and death).

"The first shall be last" sounds pretty good in theory, but in the real world, last place is no fun at all. You get ignored and trampled on a lot, you get misunderstood and mistreated.

"Let me be your servant" sounds very pious, but in the real world serving isn't always fun. People don't always say "thank you" or demonstrate appropriate gratitude. Sometimes the people Jesus calls us to serve are pretty miserable people who never seem to tire of being served.

Yet this is our path. This is how the world is made new. This is how we are made new.

This is how we are saved from some of our worst tendencies and temptations. It's not a coincidence, I don't think, that who achieve power and greatness according to the world's definitions often fall into scandal or who have very public moral failings, whether it's abuse of power or sexual indiscretions, or financial "irregularities" or whatever.

This is true inside the church, too, sadly. I've lost count of the number of Christian celebrities whose ministries have collapsed due to very public moral failures.

And aside from the high-profile scandals, pursuing greatness as the world defines it can easily bring out the worst in us.

We'll step over others. We'll blur the truth. We'll become preoccupied with how we're being perceived, about what people are saying about us. We'll become fixated on those who we think are getting ahead of us.

We'll become greedy and envious of others. We'll resent those who seem to be getting further "ahead" than we are. We'll ground our identities in fleeting things rather than in the love of God.

We'll neglect those who need our care.

So, in telling us not to play the greatness game as the world defines it, Jesus is almost certainly trying to save us from ourselves.

He's also showing us the way to life in its fullness. It may not be easy or glamorous, but lives devoted to others are actually the way to become fully human in the way God created us to be.

We were created by love and for love in the truest sense of the word. And love is always extended outward.

I've also lost track of the number of articles about happiness that I've read over the last few years that have counseled some form of, "Get outside of your own head and your own self and do something good for other people."

Real virtue is cultivated out of the spotlight. When nobody is looking, when we will not be praised or even noticed. When it will not look remarkable, and it won't get us "ahead."

As followers of Jesus, we are to be servants of all.

And we should note that "all" is a fairly comprehensive word. It includes those who do not share our politics, our theology, our ethics, our \_\_\_\_\_.



What would our world look like if followers of Jesus consistently acted like this were true? What would our churches look like? What would our families and relationships look like?

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Our world desperately needs a different vision of greatness. Of what it is and of how it is achieved. Our world desperately needs the inversion that Jesus teaches in today's text.

I began by quoting two songs from Jon Guerra that contrasted to different kingdoms and how they are achieved.

I want to close with something he said in an interview recently. On September 6, he had this to say about his most recent recording:

I wrote & recorded these songs a little over a month ago. They just spilled out over a couple of days. I set up a few mics, hit record and that was that. The fever pitch of American politics is growing, and our hype-obsessed and rage-addicted culture will give us more and more reasons to despair. **We need help. We need hope from the outside. We need salvation. We're in a world of mirages, and the only real oasis is Jesus and his upside-down kingdom.**

I couldn't agree more. We *do* need help and hope from the outside. We *do* need salvation.

We are indeed living in a world of mirages—where our conceptions of greatness do not map on to what is true about the world.

The truth—and our only hope—is indeed Jesus and his upside-down kingdom.

May God help us to be servants of all.

Amen.

