



Pastor Ken Nelson's Sermon

SERMON – 18TH PENTECOST

MARK 9:38-50

SEPTEMBER 26, 2021

“There once was a youth named Narcissus, who thought himself very delicious. So, he stared like a fool at his face in a pool, and his folly today is still with us.”

Everything we read in our lesson today in Mark must be understood in the context of Jesus words about greatness in verses 9:33-37. There Jesus’ disciples are arguing amongst themselves (privately of course, as though you could really do that sort of thing with Jesus in the vicinity) about who was the greatest – a rather preposterous endeavor given that earlier in Mark chapter 9 we read of their inability to drive out a demon from a young man – causing Jesus to look up to heaven and sigh *“oh faithless generation, how long must I put up with you?”*

This childish argument amongst the disciples coaxed our Lord to place an actual child in their midst to show how, without jostling for position, a modest person is a true reflection of the kingdom – saying whoever “receives them” receives Jesus and in turn receives God. Then is a person great who walks by faith and not by sight. Our Lord then endorsed the good works of someone *“who was not one of them”* simply because said works were performed in his name. Our Lord is doing a thorough dressing down of his men at this point, but the best (or hardest is yet to come). If you want to be great...look not to yourselves but to the well-being of others.

For most folks that’s like telling them not to breath – so ingrained in us is our conception of the importance of us first – others next. From creation humans have been polishing their self-conception. The Lutheran Reformers – accused of being soft on sin, nevertheless took a hard line – all but calling it a virus that infects all. Sin is not a symptom but a condition they argued – it is much more than thinking, saying, or doing things that are wrong. Humans are not all little Narcissus’ – but we do flirt with ourselves quite a lot.

Our Lord breaks a few mirrors in our lesson today. He not only makes us responsible for our own failings – he makes us responsible enough to and for others that if we’re found to have led them by our example to sin, we own those too. Understand the language our Lord employs is not about self-mutilation but self-examination. Jesus was more than enthusiastic about good works done in his name even if done by people who didn’t bear his name. Our lesson today concerns itself chiefly with the behavior of those who do bear his name.

We in our culture tend to find ourselves, if not fascinating, at least attractive. We like to talk about ourselves – to talk about how we feel and feel about things and why we feel that way and how we feel about those feelings - that sort of thing. We talk of greatness as self-assertion and doing what we want and we leave self-denial for the likes of the Puritans. The self, we are taught, is created to be expressed not suppressed – our wants are to be fulfilled not sacrificed.

Self-denial is talked about today much like pride was among our ancestors of the faith. Narcissus does not come from Christian history but he’s as old as the fall of Adam and Eve – our original apple

polishers. Sadly, some in the church and not a few of our churches talk much less about the cost of discipleship and much more about the dividends of discipleship – it is done to make us healthy, wealthy and wise. In our lesson today, our Lord says in so many words “cut that sort of thinking out.” He uses a different language and preaches another gospel – he talks of counting the cost and losing our lives for others sake – though in reality he promises, that when we do we’ll truly find our life. Take your mind off your hands, feet and eyes for a moment – although I know they are front and center in our lesson today. Think not that the man who healed withered hands, palsied limbs and sight to the blind would in the next breath ask you to remove those members from yourselves.

Jesus knows where the cause of sin is – he’s put his finger right on it with his rebuke of the disciple’s self-promotion earlier. Sin comes from within – but pushes itself to the surface like weeds through the slightest crack in pavement. Where do we begin...or rather end, with modern “hosts of sin” – would you cut off your social media presence, cut back on time spent on your favorite newsfeed or with your preferred media talking head, cut down your work hours and with it a chance for promotion, pluck some leisure pursuits from your calendar, gouge your portfolio by giving more and investing less? Yes, one could go on – place a human pursuit in front of God’s word long enough and that light will expose something gone awry.

But that is not Jesus intent in this lesson finally. He is a gatherer, not a scatterer, a healer not a hurter. Our Lord simply wants to convey that he’ll apply stringent measures if needed to gather and heal. Our folly is to look to our efforts to heal and Jesus wisdom is to send us his way. In Christ we discover that humility and strength can go together – care of self and care of others are not mutually exclusive, ditto for self-assertion and self- sacrifice, the latter being the greatest expression of the former by the way. In Christ, self-denial and self-acceptance can join hands for we find our greatness just as Jesus found his.

The medicine in this lesson is stringent I agree. But that is the wondrous dimension of the faith you hold dear. Faith in the Savior who holds you dearly – the Jesus who would let them do what they wished to his limbs on the cross, faith in this dying Christ produces in us a tiny version of that cross, a little death that immunizes us from eternal death. It should not surprise us these days that the best anti-viral may be a little bit of the virus – but it’s safe to take, trust me. NO...trust the one who offers it to you, your Christ, your forgiver, who looked not to his own needs but yours – and who, when the world did it’s worst to Him, did his best for you.

AMEN