

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod  
Pentecost 18  
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Sermon by Pastor Gary A. Pufahl  
**Greatness in Christ's kingdom**

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know this, <sup>31</sup> because he was teaching his disciples. He told them, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men, and they will kill him. But three days after he is killed, he will rise."

<sup>32</sup> But they did not understand the statement and were afraid to ask him about it.

<sup>33</sup> They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" <sup>34</sup> But they remained silent, because on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. <sup>35</sup> Jesus sat down, called the Twelve, and said to them, "If anyone wants to be first, he will be the last of all and the servant of all." <sup>36</sup> Then he took a little child and placed him in their midst. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, <sup>37</sup> "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me, welcomes not just me but also him who sent me."

—Mark 9:30-37

Are you familiar with the children's game "King of the Hill"? I'm not talking about the TV show. I'm talking about the game. Do you know what it is? I'm sure children can play this game in Arizona, but it might not be as common as those who live in the Midwest during the winter months. Children love to play "King of the Hill" in winter when huge piles of snow make hills.

One person runs to the top of the snow pile and claims, "I'm king of the hill." Meanwhile others throw snowballs and push and shove that person off the hill so that they can claim to be "king of the hill." I actually don't know how a person wins, but the object of the game is pretty simple. Be the top dog. Push, shove, force people so that you can get to and stay on the top.

Sadly, that's not just a game, is it? It's a way of life for so many people. In the corporate world, you have to claw your way to the top. It doesn't matter who you stomp on and take down, just as long as you can make it to the top. It reminds me of how crabs try to get out of a bucket. They pull other crabs down so that they can get a little higher. That's natural for us as sinful human beings. That's what sinful human beings naturally do. And it might even be a struggle for us.

The high schooler bad mouths another person so that she looks better. Make yourself look appealing. Push someone else's reputation down. "I'm king of the hill."

Social media has in many ways allowed people to do this sort of thing behind a screen. Ruin another person's reputation so that you can look good. "I'm king of the hill."

We might be tempted to think that this is the only way to win as we watch the political ads flash on our TVs or computers. Tear someone else down, verbally push and shove, so that "I'm the king of the hill."

Sadly, this is natural to our sinful nature. We are convinced that the only way to get ahead in life is to take someone down who is in our way. Some people call it bullying, bossing, badgering. But it is really a selfish, self-centered, self-focused approach to life that says, "I want to be king of the hill."

But I suppose it's not a surprise to you that your Lord Jesus wants something different. It's not a surprise to you as followers of Christ to hear Jesus speak words that go contrary to the natural way of life. It's not a surprise to you that Jesus would say counter-cultural words like, **"If anyone wants to be first, he will be the last of all and the servant of all."** It's not a surprise to you that Jesus would teach, **"You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But that is not the way it is to be among you. Instead, whoever wants to be great among you will be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you will be a slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many"** (Mark 10:42-45).

Jesus is walking with his disciples through Galilee on his way to Jerusalem for the final time. He was teaching his disciples about what would take place there, how he would give his life as a ransom for many. He was teaching and explaining to them that he was going to Jerusalem to suffer, die, and rise again.

Well, the disciples didn't fully understand what Jesus was talking about. And they were afraid to ask him. *But* the conversation they had on the road? That they fully understood. They actively participated in that conversation. As they

were walking along the road, they had a conversation about “Who’s number one? Who’s the greatest?” *That* the disciples understood. But look at how Jesus responds.

**“They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, ‘What were you arguing about on the road?’ But they remained silent, because on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.”** They are silent. What could they say? Jesus is direct. It gets right at their heart. **“What were you arguing about on the road?”**

Does he ask us that question? Do we still have those quarrels, arguments, and visions of human greatness? What are the attitudes that fill our hearts? What are the thoughts that drift around in our heads? What are the words that come out of our mouths?

Oh, maybe we are more subtle than boldly saying that we are the greatest. “You know, if more people would care about things the way I do, then things would get moving along. If more people would see it my way, then life would be a lot better right now.”

Jesus cuts through all of it. Jesus knows it is far easier to voice criticism of a brother or sister in Christ than to go to them face-to-face and give them a gentle rebuke and a healthy encouragement and offer the help that they desperately need. Jesus knows that it is far easier to voice our opinions about the way things ought to be rather than to earnestly pray for his blessing on what could be.

And he asks us the question: “What were you arguing about in the church parking lot?” “What were you talking about at coffee hour?” “What were you discussing on Snapchat?” “What were you arguing about in your meetings?” Listen to Jesus’ question and carefully examine your life. Are your motives always God-pleasing? Are your words and actions done for the sake of someone else or for yourself?

**“Jesus sat down, called the Twelve, and said to them, ‘If anyone wants to be first, he will be the last of all and the servant of all.’”**

I wonder what that principle would look like in the game “King of the Hill.” I wonder what that axiom would look like in daily living. Instead of clawing and pushing your way to the top, you are on your hands and knees serving someone else. Jesus turns our world upside-down. Do you want to be first? Then be last! Be the servant of all. Do you want to be a great dad or a great mom? Then serve your children by changing their diapers and wiping their runny noses. Do you want to be a great husband? Then serve your wife by getting off the couch and doing the dishes. Do you want to be a great wife? Then serve your husband by giving him a hug and telling him how much you appreciate everything he does for the family. Do you want to be a great leader in the church or in the world? Then be the servant of all. Put others before yourself ... always.

This shouldn’t surprise you. How often did Jesus teach this? How often does he commend this way as being great? Jesus talks about a poor widow who thinks of others rather than herself in giving an offering. He holds up a person who without much thought but with a tremendous amount of love gives a glass of cold water to a little child. He talks about making a caring visit to someone who is sick and praying over them. He talks about giving a coat to someone who is cold. He speaks of giving a word of peace to people who are anxious. He demonstrates a word of forgiveness to those who feel sin’s oppression in guilt.

That’s what Jesus commends as being great. In God’s world, people are great when they selflessly *serve*. **“If anyone wants to be first, he will be the last of all and the servant of all.”** Jesus shows us that the Christian’s life is a life of humble service to God and to each other.

Now, as I say these words to you today, I can also see the countless times when I *haven’t* done that. I’ve failed at that. I’ve wanted to be first. I’ve wanted *my* agenda and *my* will to be done. I have hurt my family, my friends, my neighbors, my coworkers, my congregational members when I have pushed and clawed, trying to get on top of the hill. And if you were honest with yourself, you would have to admit the same thing.

No wonder the disciples were silent when Jesus asked the question. They knew only too well that they were being selfish, self-centered, self-focused in their thinking and arguing.

But, my friends, that is exactly why Jesus was heading to Jerusalem. He was heading for the top of a hill. He would be “King of the hill.” But the path to get him there would be with other people kicking him and hitting him and pushing him and pounding him and ridiculing him and mocking him and killing him. He was heading toward Golgotha. He was heading to the hill to die. And he walked up that hill with you in his mind.

You are so important to him that he willingly took your selfishness and self-centeredness and made it his own. You are so important to him that allowed himself to be the target. God pelted his Son, not with snowballs, but his full and perfect fury against sin. Jesus took it all for you. You are so important to him that he chooses to give you his righteousness and clothe you with his grace. He has done all that for you so that God can and does look at you and

says, "You are my beloved!" You are the beloved of the almighty God. He rejoices over you. He celebrates you. Because he has made you his beautiful, forgiven child.

As we see all Christ did to serve us, our hearts melt like snow on a warm spring day. And new growth appears. Within us grows a Christ-like obsession to serve others, without counting the cost, without any desire to be repaid. We just want to serve. My friends, how can I serve you today? Amen.