

Mark 9:30-37

“Whose Lie Is It Anyway?”

18th Sunday af. Pentecost

September 23, 2018

Our Redeemer Lutheran Church

Vicar Otterman

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God, Our Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

[Introduction: Scoring Points]

Brothers and sisters in Christ. Sometimes when we need to communicate something, the best way is by making up a story. Writer, Anne Herbert, made up such a story to show the damage that happens when we start comparing ourselves against the people around us. It goes like this:

Once upon a time there were a whole bunch of happy people who spent all their time playing fun games and frolicking through fields and forests. That’s what God said they should do, and they gladly obeyed. Life was good.

But then a snake came and told them that they could be having much, much more fun playing their games if only they kept score, so that they could give each winner an apple at the end. The people weren’t sure about this scoring idea at first, but then the snake taught them how to count up points for each game, and they all saw how fun it was to be the winner.

After that, each game changed a little so that scoring points was easier, and they stopped playing certain games like frolicking, because they were impossible to score. Eventually, the people were spending about 45 minutes a day playing, and the rest of the time they were figuring out their scores and determining who was the winner.

God was very angry with them when he saw what they were doing, so he made them leave his fields and forests. But by now the people could see how much more fun playing for points was. They didn’t want to give up their points. Some of their cumulative life scores were already over 20,000. God was being unreasonable. Besides, they couldn’t imagine a world in which their scores didn’t matter.

[Who is the Greatest?]

Much like the people in that story, the disciples in our Gospel reading were also preoccupied with their points and who among them had the highest score. During a long walk on the way to the town of Capernaum, the disciples were discussing something intently. When they arrived, Jesus asked them what they were talking about along the way. The disciples fell silent, because they had been arguing over

which one of them was the greatest, and they knew that Jesus would be disappointed in them.

This was quickly turning into a bad day for the disciples. Right before this, Jesus told them something that they couldn't understand and were too afraid to ask about. He told that he was going to be killed and would rise on the third day.

Their lack of understanding had nothing to do with the language being too difficult or the subject matter too vague. Jesus told them very simply that he would die and rise on the third day. But the disciples couldn't imagine a world in which their teacher, the new king descended from David would die at someone else's hands. He was the one who was supposed to come and defeat their enemies, take the throne in Jerusalem, and make Israel a great nation again.

Jesus dying didn't make any sense. There weren't any points in dying. Dying equals losing. It was unimaginable, so instead the disciples spent their time comparing each other's points to see who amongst them had the highest score, because the possibility that they were on the losing side was too terrible to believe.

[*Our Sinful Game*]

It's so easy today to read this passage and look down on the disciples, and think, 'what a bunch of fools. I wouldn't have been that stupid.' And just like that, you've scored some points.

It's easy to score points if you know where to find them. All you have to do is find someone who's doing worse than you, someone who can be a benchmark to measure how many points you deserve.

You see all the university students out drinking downtown: 20 points for not being like them. A middle-aged man whose job is scrubbing toilets in small town truck stop: 10 points for being more successful than him. See a racist protestor on the news: 30 points for not being prejudiced.

Points are everywhere if you know where to look. But be careful, because you can also lose points. You don't volunteer at nonprofits as much as your friend: -10 points. You got the lowest score in the whole class on the Algebra final: -15 points.

You can even play this game at church! See a member who doesn't attend the weekend services as often as you: 5 points. Uh-oh, there's someone who's on more committees than you: -10 points. Last week, you had the smartest comment at Sunday morning Bible study: 10 points. The other confirmation students didn't have to retake their exams, but you had to retake all of yours: -15 points.

Everything is worth points when we play the game, and those points determine our value. At least, it feels like they do. Our culture is caught up in being caught up in our quest to gather points and get a high score in the game of life. But the problem with the game is that you can never get enough points. No matter how high your score, it never seems like you've won. Perhaps you are one of those people. Perhaps you even feel alone. Perhaps you feel like you don't belong. Perhaps you don't have enough points to fit in.

As Christians, we've learned that Jesus loves us even though we are low scoring sinners. We even know that he died in order to save us. But it can be hard to believe in a world in which the points don't matter.

[Where Everything Is Made Up and the Points Don't Matter]

The disciples didn't understand that Jesus doesn't care about playing the game and getting points. He wasn't trying to get more points than the Pharisees. He wasn't trying to get more points than the Romans. He wasn't trying to win the game at all. He came to save us from death itself and make all of our points meaningless.

We need to stop playing the game.

When Jesus asked the disciples what they were discussing on the road and they fell silent, He found a young child, no more than 7 years old, put him in the midst of the disciples and gave him a big hug. That hug is exactly what Jesus gives you through your baptisms. He found you and hugged you with his promise of forgiveness, making you children of God.

Jesus told the disciples to stop competing with each other over points. The game is made up and the points don't matter. What matters is God's love for his children, so instead of taking points from them, he told his disciples to receive them in his name.

We need to stop playing the game.

Jesus didn't win the game. He destroyed it. Jesus took all of our sins into death when he died on the cross, and now none of our scores matter. We have everything we need from him, which means there's nothing we can win that compares to what he gives us for free.

There is no point in playing the game.

We don't love others because it gets us more points. We do it because that's what God's children do. And we are God's children in Baptism. Even when we don't feel like it's true and we can't stop worrying about how low our scores are, Jesus promises us forgiveness of sins, salvation, and eternal life. In that understanding, we rejoice in God's gifts, go out and share those gifts with others, and find rest in Jesus.

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18)
