

Sermon 9-20-09¹
Mark 9:30-37
The Rubber Hits the Road!

Right after my 16th birthday, I began working at a small hardware store in Castle Shannon called Rogers Hardware. I remember my first full day there, not really knowing what to expect or having any clue what was expected of me. Jack, the owner and my boss, started telling me what he expected of his employees and the many responsibilities I would have. I was supposed to be familiar with the products within the store, knowing how to properly use them and show others how they work, clean and straighten up the shelves, and use the register. I was on board with most things, but the whole helping people with products was a little intimidating. I mean, how was I supposed to know when 1&1/4 and 1&1/2 inch pipe is necessary under a sink?

For the first few weeks, I just walked around the store, becoming familiar with where things were located and getting used to the register. Slowly Jack would teach me about various items. As time went by I knew where things were throughout the store and had a basic knowledge of their use so that I could try and assist customers. Yet it was tough work because I had never used most of the products in the store before. I had never rewired a lamp, fixed a faucet, replaced the springs on a garage door, or owned my own lawn. It was until I began to help my dad fix things around the house, utilizing the knowledge I had received, that I suddenly knew how things really worked; that I knew the details of what to sell, the advice to give, and the best options for folks to use. It wasn't until the rubber hit the road, that all the stuff I had learned finally made sense. One interesting thing that came out of this was that through my experience selling hardware over the

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course of five years, I learned a lot about the reality of Christian discipleship. In learning about what it means to be a disciple, the rubber has to hit the road. Otherwise, it's just a vain attempt to feel good about ourselves; pretending that we don't need the transformation that God calls for in our lives. This is the reality that the disciples themselves encountered as they entered the village of Capernaum in our gospel reading this morning.

As Mark informs us, after Jesus taught his disciples what the ministry of the messiah was supposed to look like, how he would be handed over, killed, and raised on the third day, the group made their way to a house in Capernaum. Once there, Jesus asks his disciples what they had been arguing about on the way. It's a great moment when the disciples stick their tails between their legs. They knew they had been found out. Without saying a word to Jesus, he found out that they had been debating amongst themselves which of them was the greatest. Caught up in their travels and the amazing things Jesus has done so far, they failed to understand what was happening in the world. They couldn't grasp what the ministry of Jesus was all about and more importantly, they couldn't fully understand who he was and how that impacted their lives. The disciples had an idea of what being a disciple of Jesus entailed, but they completely misinterpreted the ideal they formulated in their brains from the reality that Jesus has been proclaiming and enacting day-in and day-out. Knowing they've been caught in their desires for control and greatness, the disciples lock up, remaining silent. And so Jesus, sits down, calls the Twelve to him, and breaks the silence by telling them what it really means to be a disciple when the rubber hits the road.

"If anyone wants to be first, let them be last of all and servant of all." In one sentence, Jesus takes what the disciples assume they know about the way of discipleship,

about the way of following him, and completely flips the whole thing around by telling them what real greatness is all about. He takes their desire for greatness and control and transforms it according to the will and way of God.

Greatness, according to Jesus, isn't about holding a particular rank or position, it's not about who has more honor or money, it's not about who is the smartest or the brightest or the quickest; whoever wants to be first, according to Jesus, is going to be about ministries of service – caring for the weak, for those who cannot take care of themselves, the sick, the orphaned. Jesus speaks about a way of living that turns the world upside-down by calling all of his would-be followers to a transformed life that entails being servants of all, rejecting our need and desire for control, complacency, and recognition, in favor of a more God-centered way of living that bears witness to who God is for us and what that means for our lives as those who are on the receiving end of God's glorious blessings. When the rubber hits the road in discipleship, nothing can ever be the same.

Now for us, Jesus' words are probably a little tough to hear. We've heard this passage so many times that we miss the radical spin Jesus puts on things. In the midst of our walk with God, it's really easy and enticing to read through scripture and spend time thinking about discipleship. It's easy to sort of sit back and reflect upon what being a disciple means, thinking of the ideal aspects that should be incorporated, coming up with some generalized statements about what discipleship should look like, and then spending time in a bible study or in a discussion talking about those ideals of discipleship without really living up to them. Instead we look at the world and say that living into Jesus' vision of discipleship is not really doable, Jesus never really intended on us living into this ideal vision of what discipleship would look like; rather Jesus says what he says so that we can

be encouraged to be good people, pay our taxes, feed our families, and go to bed at night feeling good about ourselves and the ways that we have tried to live up to the ideal that Jesus had set down all those years ago. Maybe what he had to say was relevant 2000 years ago but he doesn't really mean that we're supposed to be servants of all here and now, does he?

The fact of the matter is, being servants is part and parcel of following Jesus; it's a part of denying ourselves, picking up our crosses and following him. The rub is that Jesus calls us to relinquish control; to recognize that we aren't the lords of our lives, the masters of our destinies, we don't have phenomenal cosmic powers that help us make everything right, and we aren't the messiahs of God who are called to suffer, die, and rise after three days. When the rubber hits the road in discipleship, we're empowered by the Holy Spirit to fling wide the doors of our lives, relinquishing the illusions of control that we think we have, and in this way we are opened up for the way of living that Jesus calls us to get on board with. It's a servant way of living that follows our servant Lord to whom we are joined in union out of the freedom of his love and power for us. And in that great and radical way of living created by our Lord, through the power and glory of his grace, we are freed from the burdens that assail us, the worries that encompass our lives, and we are transformed more and more into the people our living, reigning, active, and present Lord is calling us to be.

This way of living, this way of being least of all and servants of all, is surely a crucifying way of discipleship. It means that God crucifies our egos, reminding us that we aren't in control, while at the same time reminding us of our new life in Christ; the God-breathed, Spirit-filled life that we enter into through the baptismal waters. It's an upside-

down, counter-intuitive way of living, and yet this is the way of our crucified and risen Lord, the way of being servants of all. For in recognizing that the control is not in our hands, we learn that discipleship is about one thing; focusing in on Jesus. In discipleship, we are cast wholly upon Jesus, wholly upon his grace, wholly upon his call, wholly upon his mighty and powerful love that not only refuses to let us go, but sends us out to be a part of his mission and ministry within our tiny part of the world here in Emsworth.

Placed across our doorway as we go out into the world from worship is a sign that's probably become a little too familiar to all of us, so much so that we forget the radical way of living Jesus calls us to get in on: "You are now entering the mission field." It's a reminder to each one of us as we leave worship that the rubber hits the road the second we step through those doors and that the call by our Lord to be servants of all is something that can happen even here in the midst of the community that surrounds us. I'm going to be provocative here: the mission field isn't in Malawi, or Russia, or India, or wherever. Our mission field begins in the community of Emsworth and within the communities of the North Boroughs. As Jesus' living and dynamic body here in Emsworth, our church is Christ's mission outpost to all those who live nearby. Folks, the rubber's hitting the road here, Jesus is working and moving and he's calling us to get on board with his mission and ministry; he's calling us to get out from under our shells and live into our call to be servants of all within the community over which he is Lord. The question is, are we willing to stop resisting Jesus as individuals and as a church; are we willing to let go of our illusions of control, let Christ mold us into his servant people, and go forth in his name and in his power? Praise, glory, and honor be to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; now and unto ages of ages. Amen.