Sunday, October 3, 1982
WHO IS THE GREATEST?
Mark 9:30-37

According to the story just read from the Gospel of Mark, Jesus had been trying to explain to his disciples that one day soon he would be arrested, put on trial and then executed. But he also told them this would not be the end of on the third day he would rise again.

The disciples, however, did not understand or maybe didn't want to understand what he was talking about. They liked things the way they were. We've had that experience. Someone tries to tell us something that seems like bad news or tells us something quite different from what we would like to believe, and because we don't want to change our point of view, we make little effort to understand what is being said.

In addition, we are afraid to ask any questions because then we might understand what is being told us and we don't want to know. Thus, if a person has cancer, that person may not want to come to terms with that fact, so he doesn't listen to what's being told him.

Sometimes we believe that "what we don't know won't hurt us," as the old cliché goes. Of course, if we actually believed that we would be in favor of closing all schools and stopping all educational programs. As I pointed out in a sermon sometime ago, "if ignorance is bliss, why are so many people unhappy?"

One way not to pay attention to what's being told us is to think and talk about another subject. That's what the disciples did. When Jesus tried to tell them what was going to happen, they began to argue among themselves as to who was the greatest.

What a contrast! Their teacher and leader was attempting to help them understand the nature of his mission and the implications for them, and all they could talk about was — "Who is the greatest?" It reminds me of a company Board of Directors which voted to go into bankruptcy and at the same meeting voted themselves a big raise in Director's fees.

Who is the greatest? Who is number one? It all depends on the criteria we are using for making that judgment.

We don't know what criteria the disciples were using. Maybe one was claiming, "I am the favorite of Jesus," and another, "Jesus loves me more than the rest of you," and yet another, "I will be in charge once Jesus has been executed," or "I can perform more miracles than all the rest of you."

We do know the disciples were not using the criteria that Jesus used when he talked about who is the greatest.

First, he asked them, "What were you discussing among yourselves?" And they were embarrassed because they knew their discussion was self-serving. They acted like children who had been caught with their hands in the cookie jar.

Who is the greatest? The arguments around that question have grown from bow and arrow to nuclear weapons. Periodically the nations sit in the most appalling ruins; but the discussion never seems to be interrupted. The cult of pre-eminence shapes the minds and ambitions of

people and nations. It stimulates every unholy emotion known to humanity-envy, covetousness, pride, vanity, greed.

We may not always openly discuss among us, “who is the greatest?” but the rating and ranking of one another is always going on. People silently think and act, “I’m better than that individual.” And we using varying criteria. I’m better looking, or I look younger for my age, or I’m taller, or I’m more skillful, or I have more money, or I have a bigger house, or a newer automobile, or smarter children, or few problems, or more power and influence, or I know the right people, or I’m closer to God, I have the correct beliefs, or my job has more prestige, or I am the favorite of my boss, or I have inside information, — the list is endless.

But says Jesus, all of these are false, useless, and misleading comparisons. Those we consider to be the least important people are in God’s eyes as important as those we consider to be the most important people. God does not judge as we judge.

Who is the greatest? Jesus gave his disciples, and he gives us the surprising answer, “If anyone would be first, be number one, he or she must be last of all and the servant of all.”

You are the greatest when you are a helper to others. You are the greatest when you aren’t trying to be the greatest!

Then Jesus took a child and put the child in the midst of them; and taking the child in his arms, he said, “Whoever receives on such child in my name receives me,” in other words, how we treat and receive children is also the test of our greatness. Why a child? Because a little child is vulnerable and in comparison, to adults helpless. It has been said that the final test of a society is what it does to children.

This morning we come to the Lord’s table as equals — that’s part of the meaning of communion. We are not to come to this table arguing about who is the greatest. We also come remembering that as God loves us so also, we are to love one another and when that is done, the argument about greatness fades away. Amen.