

**Mark 9:30-37 (NRSV)**

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

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Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

Near the end of July, 37,000 young and adult Lutherans gathered in New Orleans for a week of learning and service and play. Saint Nicholas was represented by 19 of our In Crowd high school youth and five chaperones.

Now, the work and fundraising for the Gathering had begun much earlier. Who can forget waking up to flamingoes in our front yards, days spent in landscaping, donut and pasta sales? Thanks to the congregation and the hard work of our fundraisers and youth, thousands of dollars were raised to defray some of the costs of housing, food and transportation for the week. Even so, the youth and their families saved up for months to make the trip.

The Gathering was spread across five days from Wednesday July 22 to Sunday July 26 – we got to New Orleans a day early and spent an extra day. One of the days was a day of service, working on projects in the local New Orleans community. One day was a day of craft projects and physical challenges at the Interaction center – there was a zipline, some bumper car things and all kinds of information booths. And one day was a day of learning – we got a chance to learn about social justice, about health and wellness and about the environment, and what the Bible and the church teach us about all these things.

Every night we gathered in the Superdome for music and for a program of speakers. The speakers were just amazing people. One was a volunteer who came down to New Orleans to help build houses and just never left and now coordinates a program of home building and restoration in Saint Bernard parish, one of the areas hit so hard by Hurricane Katrina. Another, Reverend Becca Stevens began a ministry for women who had histories of criminal involvement and drug abuse. Another pair of brothers started a program called “Save the Children” to build schools in less developed countries. I think I mentioned Michel Chikwanine, a young man who was abducted from his home in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and made to become a child soldier. Another started a running program for homeless men to give them a sense of pride and purpose. One of the things in common with all of these speakers was that they were young people who were making a difference in the world, each in his or her own unique way.

And every night we gathered for worship and to review the day. We had a program of devotions – we were each given a copy of the new Lutheran Book of Faith Study Bible. Some nights that we weren't too tired we went out to the program of activities held at the hotels where the young people were staying – one of those nights our own Ben Cooper and Trevor Flynn competed for the “Gathering

Idol” – I think they should have won, actually, doing a singing and rap number that they’ll share with us in a short while.

It’s hard to decide what was most important about the Gathering. It might be the sharing that went on among the In Crowd members, it may have been the worship or the evening speakers ...

(One of the teenagers stands and interrupts) Gee, Pastor, I think the most important thing was ...

Well, why don’t you all come up and talk about what was the most important thing you learned at the Gathering?

(Various teens speak)

What did the Gospel lesson say? – when we welcome one of them we welcome Christ and the One who sent him. I don’t know if anything I ever do in ministry will be more satisfying than working with this group of young people. I’m afraid they know they’re very close to my heart. That being said, I really do think that this year and in the coming years they are going to make a big difference in the life of this church and in this community and the world. Many of them are already in positions of leadership in the congregation and in the community. I think this is the sort of thing we hope for when we begin working with a youth program but it doesn’t always happen quite as wonderfully as it has here. I’m very grateful to the parents and the chaperones and the Tim and Lauren who are so supportive of the programs for youth here, and I’m also grateful to the high schoolers themselves for making being a pastor such an exhausting and such a rewarding job.

Amen.