

Title: Beyond Humility
Text: Mark 9:33 – 37
Date: Sept. 23, 2018

This is our third week in Mark today – the earliest of the gospel accounts. Last week in particular we highlighted a Jesus who did not seem to conform to anyone’s expectations. We ended up by stressing how Jesus was seeking actual followers, more than people who believed the “right things” about him. Furthermore, those who are truly about following him will be known by embarking on a path of self-denial. (see Mark 8:34-35) As lofty as that sounds in theory, today’s text reads more like a case study, with the disciples arguing about which one of them was the greatest. Seriously?

The relevance of Scripture continues to amaze me. This is just one more example where a preacher doesn’t have to go around fishing for an example to make something relatable.

This week’s lesson has a timeless quality to it. “Who is the greatest?” The way in which this text offers comment on and critique of our present-day construal of greatness is more than timely. It is, in fact, necessary. Without it, so-called and self-proclaimed greatness runs amok without any checks and balances. We can all think of people who – explicitly or implicitly - proclaim their own greatness. You are probably thinking of someone right now! So today we will consider some qualifiers that might decide and determine said greatness.

If we are honest with ourselves, the capacity to assess our own greatness is rather challenged, to say the least. We’re not good at that. We lack a certain sense of self-reflective capacity to evaluate just how great we are. As a result, we should be suspicious of those who insist on their own greatness, who seem confident in their ability to adjudicate the criteria of greatness, and apply it to themselves. We don’t have to look far these days to find leaders who regularly tout their tenures as the best ever, the greatest ever. But be warned, says Jesus. This little story featuring Jesus and his disciples suggests that what determines greatness is best set by some sort of objectivity *outside of ourselves*.

“Who is the greatest?” is a question that will never get old, never run its course, never be immaterial. Why? Because the measure of greatness always seems up for grabs. Because the gauge of greatness is as contextual, as subjective, as most anything in life. Our capacity to assess greatness with any kind of consistency, any kind of reliable or uniform characteristics, has not shown to have a very good track record. And we, whether that be us as individuals who profess to be Christian, or churches, or Presbyteries, certainly have not been dependable in our ability to determine greatness with Jesus’ qualifications in mind.

Instead, it is surprising how regularly we capitulate to the world’s standards of greatness, which are usually yoked with power, wealth, control, status, and influence: criteria set by those who do not have the Gospel in mind, who choose blissful unawareness of Jesus’ principles, who have relegated the ministry of Jesus to the margins of moral imagination.

And lest I mistakenly imply that pastors are exempt from such sway, we should consider how ministers evaluate the greatness of their own ministries, the greatness of their churches, the greatness of their preaching. Let’s be honest. Outcome is often measured by numbers and statistics. We look at membership rolls, worship attendance, and “successful” programs. I might be conscious of how many emails I get commending me on my message. Let’s be honest. Not one of us imagines the success of our calling as being “the least;” as being recognized as one with the least power, the least influence. Not one of us imagines having only the capacities of a child when it comes to our positions and our vocations. Not one of us imagines being looked down upon so as to be deemed great.

And yet, here we are. Preaching about the kind of greatness, Jesus' greatness, that calls out classifications which ignore his teaching: those perceptions of greatness that find Jesus' characterization of greatness not to our liking, those interpretations of greatness that think Jesus' description of greatness less than convenient because they do not align with what they need greatness to be, what's best for them, that which casts them in the best light.

And so, as it turns out, the definition of greatness is indeed a question of faith, a theological question. A question that the faithful are asked to consider.

Mark is pointing to something important, something essential, about believing in Jesus. Because by God becoming human - this notion of the spirit being fully present in the person of Jesus - every assumption of greatness that the world deemed as definitive has been upended. Because this notion of God becoming human decided that greatness is *not* about separation, *but solidarity*; not about "better than," *but relationship*. Not about self-adulation, but *the empowerment and encouragement of the other*.

Greatness – in the eyes of this self-emptying God - is related to vulnerability. Greatness is determined by service and sacrifice, by humility and honor, and by truthfulness and faithfulness. We are called to preach this kind of greatness, we are called to embody this kind of greatness, so that the world can witness the true meaning of *greatness born out of love*.

Spiritual greatness begins with our own individual experiences of the divine, and then expands to embrace all creation. Alfred North Whitehead asserts that peace results from a spiritual vision in which the individual soul becomes identified with the well-being of the larger world. Individualism is transformed into world loyalty as my own well-being is balanced with the well-being of others and ultimately of creation as a whole. Once again, we see how a mystical orientation towards spirituality can have real-world implications.

Very often there are common themes in our lectionary options, but I don't always take the time to highlight that. The reading from James today seems to be too good a match to pass over. So while we think of the disciples in our gospel reading today in their petty posturing, Jesus says to them, "**Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.**" (Mark 9:35) I would suggest that James adds another layer of detail to this discussion on what servant leadership looks like. Hear what he has to say:

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, and unspiritual. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder . . . But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? . . . Submit yourselves therefore to God. . . . Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you." (James 3:13 – 4:3, 7-8a)

I think that is a beautiful, practical tie-in to our gospel lesson! A word to the disciples. A word to us gathered here.

I have an old story to share which I believe is relevant, and I share it with a tip of the hat to the Pastor Nominating Committee. Some years ago St. Paul School of Theology was seeking a new president. Over one hundred candidates applied, and the search committee narrowed the list to five eminently qualified persons. Then somebody came up with a brilliant idea: let's send a person to the institutions where each of the five finalists is currently employed, and interview the janitor at each place, asking *them* what they think of those seeking to be our president. This was done and one janitor gave such a glowing appraisal of William MacElvaney that he was selected President of St. Paul's School of Theology.

Somebody on that search committee understood, in a flash of genius, that those who live close to Christ become so secure in that love that they no longer relate to other people according to rank or power or money or prestige. Though he was a humble man, he had a noted career as a social activist. He was one of those who defied Methodist church law, and officiated at a same-sex wedding.

Returning to our premise, Jesus presents his followers with a countercultural vision of spiritual greatness, in which the leader is servant, and the easily forgotten members of society take center stage. Children, not Caesar, model what it is like to be great in God's realm—and in welcoming children, we welcome God and see the world with new eyes. So *after* Jesus told his disciples, **"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all,"** he placed a little child among them as an object lesson. And taking the child 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."** (Mark 9:37)

In any culture, children are vulnerable; they are dependent on others for their survival and well-being. In the ancient world, their vulnerability was magnified by the fact that they had no legal protection. A child had no status, no rights. A child certainly had nothing to offer anyone in terms of honor or status. But it is precisely these little ones with whom Jesus identifies. **"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me . . ."**

Our visions of greatness will shape our spirituality, ethics, and political involvement. But more than a soft-spoken humility, I am suggesting a vision of a greatness that has at its core a renunciation of dominance. A vision where you instinctively identify with the vulnerable - the powerless.

Look at the news stories of our day and consider who has power, and who doesn't. On a similar vein you might also look at the company you keep personally. Are the powerless in your own circle of friends? Who you surround yourself with speaks to your relationship with power.

If you are starting to feel uncomfortable with the challenge, I would remind you that there is no call to perfection in Mark. Just a call to follow in the way and spirit of Jesus. Just try and stay on the path. Can you show up just one more week?

Amen.

Mark 9:33 – 37

“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.”**