
WHAT IS GREATNESS?

I don't think the question of greatness has disappeared since JESUS' day.

- From the disciples in the Gospel to Muhammad Ali's signature boast nearly 60 years ago about being "the greatest" to the familiar slogan of the presidential campaign, "Make America Great Again," we continue to discuss and debate what constitutes greatness.
- And that question, "What is greatness?" is at the heart of today's Gospel.

Though it comes almost a chapter later, this passage from Mark seems to follow right on the heels of JESUS' words from last week, "Whoever wants to be MY disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow ME."

- Yet, here are the disciples arguing about which of them is the greatest,
 - and undoubtedly entitled to the best place at JESUS' table or most important position in HIS Kingdom.
- Like so many today, they are confused about greatness, or greatness, as JESUS sees it. They were bickering while walking from one town to another, so much so that JESUS couldn't ignore it.
- So, HE asks, "What were you arguing about on the way?"
 - And they are silent, embarrassed to admit that they were arguing about which of them was the greatest.

Perhaps they were bragging about who spent the most time with JESUS, who was best at following JESUS' teachings, or who had given up the most to join JESUS.

- We don't really know.
 - What we do know is that JESUS is not impressed.
- And so, HE tells them, "Anyone who wants to be first—that is, greatest—must be the very last, and the servant of all."

This is not as sharp a rebuke as the one HE had made to Peter last week: "Get behind ME, Satan!"

- Nevertheless, it must have stung them.
- This "first must be last" thing is definitely not what they were taught.
 - And, let's admit it, it is not what most of us were taught either
 - Greatness, we assume, implies power, accomplishment, fame, wealth, and everything else that allows you to do things, to influence others, to make things go your way.

But that's not what JESUS says.

- And to make HIS point, JESUS scoops up a young child into HIS arms and tells HIS followers that whoever welcomes a child like this welcomes HIM.
 - And suddenly, it seems like JESUS has gone from saying something a little odd—to be first, you have to be last—to saying something that sounds, well, kind of crazy.

In the JESUS' time, children didn't matter.

- Oh, of course, their parents loved them.
- But they had no rights, no influence, no standing in the community.
- They were utterly dependent, utterly vulnerable, utterly powerless.
 - If women and foreigners were second-class citizens, children were third-class.
 - For all practical purposes, except to their parents, they were worthless.
- So how can JESUS say caring about a child counts as greatness?
 - It was, well, crazy.

Or was it? Think about it for a minute.

- What if JESUS is right?
- I mean, what if we imagined that greatness wasn't really about power, wealth, fame, and all the rest?
 - What if we measured greatness by how much we share with others?
 - Or how much we take care of others?
 - Or how much we love others?
 - Or how much we serve others?
- What kind of a world would that be?
 - Can you imagine if people were regularly trying to outdo each other, not by how much they have,
 - but in their deeds of kindness and service?
 - What if the nationally broadcast award shows were focused on recognizing those who tried to help as many people as possible?
- What kind of a world would that be like?
 - I don't know about you, but I think it would be pretty great.

JESUS' definition of greatness seems crazy initially because it is so entirely and utterly counter-cultural.

- He calls us to imagine that true greatness lies in seeing the world as little children see it.
 - By not seeing differences and the things that can divide us.
 - By only seeing each other as friends to be loved.

When I was about two-and-a-half years old, my parents volunteered to take some friends to the airport so they could fly to visit family.

- As we walked through the airport, or so my parents tell it, I saw a little black girl about my age with her parents, whom we did not know.
- I ran over to her and hugged her.
 - In return, she kissed me on the cheek.

My parents' friends, seeing this, quickly asked, "Aren't you going to make him wipe that off?"

- "No, of course not," my parents replied.

How do children go from liking and loving everyone to having prejudices?

- How do children go from trust and acceptance of everyone to suspicion and dislike of those who are different?
- Where are we told that some are better than others instead of all being the same and deserving of the same kindness and respect?

JESUS offers us a different vision for greatness, crazy though it may be.

- HE suggests that greatness comes in the innocence of childlike faith you
- HE calls us to imagine that true greatness lies in service by taking care of and advocating for those who are most vulnerable,
 - those with little influence or power,
 - those our world is most likely to ignore, like children.

Though JESUS spoke these words to the community of HIS disciples then and offers a model for us now in our congregational life, this vision also applies to each of us individually.

- How are we doing with measuring our success and greatness, not by what we take in, but by what we give away?
 - Not by the influence we wield, but by the service we offer?
 - Not by accumulating more, but by sharing what we have?
 - Not by being first, but by being eager to work hard to see others move ahead?

Some years ago, the teens at the church I was serving were discussing success as I came walking up.

- They talked about the cars they would own, the clothes they would wear, the possessions they would have.
 - As I arrived, they said, “Hey, Pastor. What do you think success is?”
 - I paused for a moment and then replied, “For me, success is figuring out what JESUS wants me to do and then doing it.”
 - “Wow!” they said. “That’s really good.”
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Make no mistake. This is hard stuff.

- It is absolutely and totally different from what society, whether in the first or the twenty-first century, tells us.
 - It was hard for the first disciples, and it is hard for us.
 - They didn’t understand what JESUS meant, so they fell into the trap of trying to put themselves ahead of each other and everyone else.
 - We often do the same, looking out for ourselves rather than others,
 - trusting less in GOD for our security than we do in wealth,
 - shutting others out rather than inviting them in,
 - seeking our own welfare rather than that of those around us.
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But here’s the thing: the road the disciples are traveling with JESUS when they fall into petty arguments about who is the greatest...is the road to Jerusalem.

- Even while HIS disciples misunderstand, don’t believe, or just plain ignore what HE is saying,
 - JESUS is walking the road to Jerusalem and to the cross,
 - willingly in order to sacrifice everything to serve them and us.
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Three short prayers sum up the Christian life.

- They can be incredibly helpful to pray when we consider JESUS’ teaching today.

The first is in response to HIS counter-cultural command that the first must be last and that true greatness lies in service:

- “LORD, help us.”

The second comes when we fall short of our ideals, giving in to insecurity and fear and looking out for ourselves first:

- “LORD, have mercy.”

The third is when we realize that even as we fall short, JESUS still dies for us, still lives for us, and still loves us more than anything:

- “Thanks be to GOD.”

JESUS does not give up on His disciples—not then and not now—and still offers us a different vision of greatness that can lead us to imagine and work toward an entirely different world.

So, hear JESUS’ words again and know that they are directed to HIS disciples, both those gathered around HIM in Capernaum and those gathered around HIS table today.

- *Sitting down, JESUS called the Twelve and said, “Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.”*
- And in response, perhaps all we can say is, “LORD, help us. LORD, have mercy. Thanks be to GOD.”