

“The Measure of True Greatness”

Mark 9:30-37

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I have shared the following reflection with some of you before.

Then Jesus took his disciples up the mountain and gathering them around him, he taught them saying:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are the meek.

Blessed are they that mourn.

Blessed are the merciful.

Blessed are they that thirst for justice.

Blessed are you when persecuted.

Blessed are you when you suffer.

Be glad and rejoice for your reward is great in heaven.

Then Simon Peter said, ‘Are we supposed to know this?’

And Andrew said, ‘Do we have to write this down?’

And James said, ‘Will we have a test on this?’

And Philip said, ‘I don’t have any paper.’

And Bartholomew said, ‘Do we have to turn this in?’

And John said, ‘The other disciples didn’t have to learn this.’

And Matthew said, ‘May I go to the bathroom?’

And Judas said, ‘What does this have to do with real life?’

Then one of the Pharisees who was present asked to see Jesus’ lesson plan and inquired of Jesus, ‘Where is your anticipatory set and your objectives in the cognitive domain?’

And Jesus wept.

It is a fictitious story but an accurate description of the disciples. Especially in the Gospel According to Mark, the twelve just don't seem to get anything Jesus tries to tell them. In today's reading from Mark 9, as they are on their way to Capernaum, Jesus predicts his suffering and death for the second of three times, but rather than take in this message and ponder what it means, the disciples begin to argue with each other about who is the greatest among them. Jesus says he's going to die and they want to know who gets to be the line leader!

How can they do this? They are like Larry, Curly and Moe bumping into each other, or Gilligan messing up one task after another, or my father who while teaching me to sail, tossed the anchor into the water without securing the end of the rope, and then watched the anchor go further and further down until the last bit of rope went in after with it. How can anyone be so daft? Jesus must scratch his head and wonder who chose these guys until he remembers it was him.

So, he asks what they have been talking about and they have the sense to keep quiet for once, even Peter, and then Jesus tries one more time to teach them. "Whoever wants to be first," he says, "must be last of all and servant of all." And then, he takes a child into his arms and says, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Children, we may recall, don't get much respect in this time, but Jesus spends most of his time with people who get little respect - the poor and outcast, the marginalized. So should his disciples. That's the measure of true greatness, Jesus says, a willingness to serve in humble ways, to sacrifice self-interest, to help the weak and vulnerable.

Do they get it now? No, they do not, but Jesus, like a good parent and preacher, keeps being willing to waste his breath until one day, after his death and resurrection, they finally get it.

But, of course, it's not just the first disciples who are slow to get the point. It is us too, and not just about everyday matters like tying down the end of the anchor rope, but matters of faith as well. How much time does the church spend arguing about colors of paint or styles of worship or who gets to do what or make which decision while people

all around us are starving to death, killing each other left and right, destroying the planet and then being destroyed by a dramatically increasing number of natural disasters, amusing themselves to death (as one author put it) while experiencing profound emptiness?

It's not that we have a magic wand to wave and immediately fix everything, but we do have the resources to make a difference, to make the world better, to address every one of these needs. We can feed the hungry and empower them to feed themselves. We can work for peace and justice which is required for enduring peace. We can exercise more faithful stewardship of the earth which has been entrusted to our care with God. We cannot fill the void others feel, but we can point the way to the Christ who can.

We can do all of these things and more if we are not too busy arguing over who gets to be the line leader. The trouble is like those first disciples, we are easily distracted from our calling and sorely tempted to misunderstand the nature of true greatness.

On the surface, it may seem like we are good here. We are the ones in church, after all, people who have chosen to follow Jesus in paths of service and love. But what values shape our everyday lives? What are our hopes and dreams? Or to focus the question in a different way, what do we hope for most in the lives of our children?

We want them to be nurtured in faith, of course, to be baptized, to declare their faith in Christ, but in practical, everyday terms, do we want them to find meaning in serving humankind or to accomplish great things in lucrative professions? It is not always either/or, but what do we think about most, talk about most, care about most, and what might this say about our real-world values and how we measure greatness? The concept of downward mobility Jesus talks about doesn't just apply to church life, though we struggle to live by this principle even here.

In one setting where I served, every significant church matter became a bit more challenging because of two power groups that were determined to oppose each other, no matter how they felt about the issue at hand. If one group was for an idea or program, the other was against it. The conflict went back thirty years to a time when one matriarch wanted her spouse to be deacon chair while the other wanted hers.

In another setting there was a dear soul who served as librarian for many years in a tiny, little space. When the church decided to expand its facilities, it included a plan to have a brand new, state-of-the-art media center with ten times the space. Everyone thought the librarian would be thrilled. She was not. It was partly a matter of resisting change and partly of matter of other people being involved in the decision. She was involved. She just didn't get to decide by herself. She never went into the new space. Instead, after all was said and done, she presented at a church conference a poem entitled, "The Little Library That Was."

In yet another setting, there was a man who helped with sound, which was great, except when it wasn't, because he thought he owned the sound system and thus made unilateral decisions that drove everyone crazy. In fact, he thought he owned the whole church and thus would take down posters he didn't like, even if they were put up by missions leaders. "I like to think of the church as my home," he said, "To which I replied, "That is the problem. It isn't."

These are all extreme examples, I know, but the truth is we all have the potential for such feelings at least, even if we don't act on them. We all can be tempted to think too much of ourselves, our agendas, and lose sight of the church's ultimate purposes and nature. James 3:14 warns us against envy and selfish ambition. Jesus teaches us that true greatness lies in a willingness to put others first in all things and to find ourselves in service. But like those very first disciples, all of us who are human are tempted at times to follow a different path.

In fact, we are tempted to measure greatness inappropriately not just in relationship to our individual lives but as it concerns the faithfulness of churches. Most of the time when people talk about "great" churches, they mean churches with thousands of people, millions of dollars-worth of facilities and live television broadcasts. And there is nothing intrinsically wrong with such churches, though there are inherent risks, but if we take Jesus' teachings on greatness seriously, we think about small-town churches that are faithful to their calling and churches that find a way to reach out to the marginalized.

An African-American woman I knew who was HIV-positive started a church in a poor, drug-infested slum. When people asked why

she started a church there where very few people would join and none of them could help support her ministry, she replied, “Because they need the Gospel in all its fullness,” and she added, “Jesus said, ‘Go ye,’ not ‘Y’all come.’” Indeed, but how difficult it is to remember these things.

Yet, as we have noted, like a good parent, Jesus is willing to keep wasting his breath until we hear what he is saying, and on this side of his death and resurrection, it is easier for us to grasp his teachings about suffering, sacrifice and service, about how to measure and pursue true greatness. The disciples get this finally, many of them laying down their lives like Jesus. We can get it too. In fact, we already do in many ways.

What is our identity downtown? How are we known by people who have little or no connection to us? It is all tied to our clothing ministry and everything that has grown out of it. What do we value most in our shared life, talk the most about, get excited about? It is one kind of mission endeavor or another – in Honduras or Ukraine, Arkansas or Alabama, Philadelphia or New York. What is our focus right now? It is trying to discern how we best help our neighbors who have been devastated by Hurricane Florence.

Some already have gone to help. We have gathered supplies and will gather money as well. And many more will go and serve in simple ways, not drawing attention to themselves but extending compassion to people in need. It’s what yesterday’s Touching Raleigh with Love was about, helping others in simple ways, giving ourselves in service. That’s where true greatness lies, says Jesus. It’s not about occupying important positions. It’s about being willing to put the needs of others first.

I think of a man in another setting who was just one of those humble saints who did whatever was needed. He visited the sick and homebound, took food when it was needed. He gave people rides, whether he knew them or not, stopped to fix cars broken down, gave something to anyone who begged even though he didn’t have much. He followed Jesus’ teaching as closely as anyone could without ever wanting any attention or recognition. Billy Graham once bristled when someone said he was a great pastor. He suggested that many who labor faithfully in remote places are truly great by Jesus’ standards.

If you are a tennis fan and watched much of this year's U.S. Open, you might have caught a fascinating story. I'm not talking about the hoopla connected to the women's final which is a shame because what ought to be remembered there is Naomi Osaka's incredible accomplishment, the first Japanese person to win a grand slam title. I'm talking about the story about Johnnie Ashe, Arthur's brother.

This year, as the tournament celebrated the 50th anniversary of Arthur Ashe's accomplishment of being the first African-American man to win the U.S. Open, the story was told of his brother's sacrifice. In 1967, Johnnie Ashe was a Marine fighting in Viet Nam while Arthur was in the Army and stationed at West Point. When Johnnie wrote to Arthur saying he only had a couple months of duty left, Arthur let him know he would have only fifteen months left when Johnnie got back.

Thinking about trying to protect his brother, who was an amateur tennis star, and realizing the military's reticence by this time to employ multiple siblings in combat zones at the same time, Johnnie went to his sergeant and offered to do another tour so that his brother could remain at home. He never said anything about this to Arthur, who went on to win the Open in 1968, but he did eventually tell his father. During the Open this year, Johnnie, who made it home safely after his service, received a West Point flag in his family's honor. That is true greatness - being willing to sacrifice all for someone else.

There are many different ways we can think about greatness, many measures that are common to our culture, we know what they are. But our ultimate standard is Jesus. He was a man who owned nothing, never married or had children, never seemed to have an ordinary job since he travelled about too much to earn an income, only lived about thirty-three years, and yet, he affected the world more than anyone who has ever lived, inspired followers in each generation for nearly 2,000 years, billions of them in the present day. He is our standard for greatness.