

JESUS – GREATNESS

TEXT: Mark 9:30-37

I love the Gospel of Mark. The writer gives us so many options for focus. And this week is no exception. But after about the fourth reading of the passage, I realized my focus was on its timeless question: “Who is the greatest?” The way in which this text offers comment on and critique of our present-day thinking about greatness is more than timely. In fact, I believe it is necessary. Without our thoughtful consideration, so-called and self-proclaimed greatness runs amok without any checks and balance. Without any controls or constraints. Without any qualifiers that might decide and determine such greatness.

It’s interesting that the capacity to assess our own greatness is rather challenged, to say the least. We lack a certain sense of self-reflective capacity to evaluate how great we are. So it should follow that 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. Be warned, says Jesus. Today’s conversation between 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. A generation ago we heard Muhammad Ali’s signature boast about being “the greatest”. In more recent history we heard that we needed to “make America great again”. And we still discuss what constitutes greatness. And that is the question at the heart of the passage we are faced with today. The gauge of greatness is as contextual, as subjective, as almost anything in life. Our capacity to assess greatness with any kind of consistency, any kind of reliable or uniform characteristics, has not manifested a very good track record. And we, whether that be us as individuals who profess to be Christian, or

churches, or institutions of the church, certainly have not been dependable in our ability to determine greatness with Jesus' qualifications in mind.

Instead, we regularly capitulate to the world's standards of greatness, which are usually yoked with power, wealth, control, status, influence, and other such attributes. Such criteria is 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. This is the very question the disciples are arguing about in today's text.

Fortunately, Jesus has a response: he provides some answers about how we might break free from our addiction to unhealthy forms of greatness by re-imagining leadership. In our lesson, we find Jesus schooling the disciples on what greatness looks like in his ministry. He says to the disciples: "Whoever wants to be first (or greatest) must be last of all". Not only are the disciples confused about Jesus' words of his impending death, they're also confused about greatness. Or at least Jesus seems to think so. Apparently, they were bickering while walking from one town to another so much that he could not ignore them. And so he asks: "What were you arguing about on the way?" And they suddenly got quiet, embarrassed to admit that they were arguing about which one of them was the greatest.

Perhaps they were boasting about which one of them spent the most time with Jesus, or maybe which one had seen the greatest miracle, or perhaps performed the greatest miracle. We don't really know. What we do know is that Jesus...is not impressed. And so he tells them, "Whoever wants to be first – that is, greatest – must be last and be a servant to all".

This is definitely not what the disciples expected to hear. Greatness, they assumed, and we assume, implies power, accomplishment, fame, wealth, and all those other things that allow us to do things, to influence people, to make things go our way.

But that's not what Jesus says. And to drive home his point, he scoops up a young child into his arms and tells them 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 first century world, as you know, children were not worth much. Of course, their parents loved them, but they had no rights, no influence, no standing. They were utterly dependent, utterly vulnerable, utterly powerless. So how could caring for a child count as greatness?

And here is where we really have to pay attention. What if Jesus is right? What if we imagined that greatness wasn't about power and wealth and fame and all the rest, but instead we measured greatness by how much we share with others; how much we take care of others; how much we love others; how much we serve others? What kind of world would we live in? Can you imagine if people were regularly trying to outdo each other in kindness and service? If there were nationally broadcast competitions to see who was willing to be last so that others could go first? If there were reality TV shows that followed people around as they tried to help as many people as possible?

The definition of greatness that Jesus offers seems crazy initially because it is so completely, utterly counter-cultural. He calls us to imagine that true greatness lies in service by taking care of those who are most vulnerable – those with little influence or power, those the culture is most likely to ignore.

Jesus models for us what leadership looks like. He summons a young child to come to him. Children symbolize God's blessing. In the Gospels, children also symbolize the character a person must possess to enter the kingdom of God. In spite of the symbolic status children hold, we find their voices silent for the most part throughout the Bible. I would suggest that children symbolize the voiceless, those at the margin of the community.

Jesus welcomes the child to the center of the community and wraps his arm around her and suggests that if we want to be great, then we must practice welcoming the voiceless to the very center of the community. Expand the community's center to include those people at the margins. Make the margins the new center of the community because this is where the welcoming presence of God dwells. Otherwise, we alienate ourselves from the very presence of Jesus and the One who sent him. This is what greatness looks like in Jesus' ministry. It is an insignificant greatness.

So what does this mean for us? We who love our churches, denominational bodies and traditions, must re-imagine our ambitions and concepts of greatness. We must adopt new practices of insignificant greatness.

We hear the call to re-imagine greatness all across the land in the face of our current economic, denominational and church leadership crises. We hear the call to be leaders of insignificant greatness in hopes that the church might escape from society's seductive grasp. So, perhaps the definition of greatness is indeed a question of faith. Mark is pointing out to us something important, something essential, about believing in Jesus. Because God becoming human, the incarnation, upended every assumption of greatness that the world deemed as definitive. Because God becoming human decided that greatness is not about separation but about solidarity, not about "better than" but about relationship, not about self-adulation but empowerment and encouragement of the other.

Greatness is determined by weakness and vulnerability. By service and sacrifice. By humility and honor. By truthfulness and faithfulness. We are called to live into 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. Amen.