

The Question No One Would Answer

Mark 9:30-37

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First
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I

What does it mean to be great and how does the world measure greatness?

For a football player, greatness means rushing for over 1000 yards a season
or passing for over 300 yards a game.

For a baseball player, greatness means batting over .300,
hitting over 30 homeruns
and driving in over 100 runs a season.

For a pop singer, it means winning American Idol,
having one's record go platinum,
and winning a Grammy award.

For an actor, it means an Emmy, a Tony, or an Oscar.

For a high school student, it means straight A's and scholarship offers from
Harvard, Princeton, and Yale.

In the world, greatness is reserved for the few,
and it has to do with external accomplishments and tangible rewards.

But in our gospel lesson today Jesus sets this whole notion of greatness on its head.

He redefines for all time what it means to be great...
and calls for each of us to follow his example.

Let's take a closer look at our lesson from Mark 9
and the true meaning of greatness.

II

Jesus and his disciples are passing through Galilee when he continues to teach them about what lay ahead in Jerusalem.

Three times he will tell them that suffering and death are at the end of the road.

In the first instance, last week's gospel lesson, Peter rebuked Jesus, causing Jesus to say,

“Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

At that time Jesus gathered the crowd and his disciples and taught them that the true meaning of discipleship was to deny one's self,

take up one's cross,
and follow Jesus.

Now in chapter 9 we have the second “passion prediction,” verse 31:

“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.”

Mark is quick to add,

“They did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask.”

Typical, isn't it?

Like the student who is afraid to ask her teacher for clarification on how to solve the math problem.

Or the teenager who is afraid to question the destructive activities his friends are engaged in.

Or the wife who gets aggravated because her husband won't stop and ask for directions.

Afraid to ask....

How much harm has been caused because someone was afraid to ask questions?

When we don't comprehend something, we tend to figure out all kinds of ways to ease our discomfort.

We avoid asking questions so as not to appear stupid.

We don't want to expose our lack of knowledge,
and so we stay mute.

But what the disciples hear in this morning's gospel reading is not your usual summary of information.

Being told that Jesus will be betrayed and killed and then rise again is likely no easier the second time around.

Maybe the disciples don't ask questions because they are afraid that what Jesus is saying might well be true.

The first time he said it, they could sort of brush it off as something he said in passing.

But now he's saying it again.

And look what happened to Peter the last time!

The disciples are afraid.

The thing is, when you start asking questions,
you may get answers that you don't want to hear
or are not ready to hear.

When you start asking questions,
you are engaging in dialogue—

and dialogue is a rather unpredictable affair.

It is easier to stay silent, because monologue is a much safer place to be.

Monologue is the communication mode of choice these days both at religious gathering and political rallies and debates.

When we start asking questions,
we move uncomfortably closer to the truth.

We can't handle the truth!

You can see why this is a crucial moment in Mark's gospel,
and a crucial moment for the disciples.

This is the time for questions,
for conversations,
for hearing the truth.

Because once you start asking questions, there is no going back—
which is why it is always easier to stay silent.

III

So instead of the disciples asking questions and pushing through the fear,
Mark tells us that an argument broke out among them.

“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 about who was the greatest.”

“What were you arguing about on the way?”

It was the question no one would answer.

Ah...gosh, Jesus, we don't know...

*nothing really...
 we were just talking...
 Uh...nice weather...
 Hey, what's for dinner?*

As William Barclay points out, their silence was the silence of shame and they had no defense.

The disciples are like so many in this world...
 like so many of us,
 obsessed with position and power.

And their obsession rendered them incapable of comprehending,
 much less accepting,
 Jesus' words about suffering, death, and resurrection.

Notice that Jesus does not chastise them or scold them for thinking about greatness.

He does not tell them that they ought not to strive for greatness.

Jesus does not try to make them feel guilty about their ambitions.

Rather, he sits down—
 assuming the posture of a rabbi—
 calls his disciples and says to them,

“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”

Jesus wants them to redefine and reframe their picture of what true greatness is.

In the kingdom of God, he says, true greatness comes in developing the attitude and the ability for people of power to be of service to those who are invisible.

Jesus says, “If you truly want to be first...
 if you want the real place of honor...
 then become the servant of others.”

In the kingdom of God, greatness...

prestige...

honor...

are given to those who make themselves the servants of those who have no power.

IV

*“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.’”*

New Testament scholars refer to this as an enacted parable.

Jesus places a child—

I’m guessing it was a toddler—

in the midst of the disciples

to illustrate his point about greatness.

Why a child?

In our culture we have a warm and fuzzy feeling toward children.

Children are valued for their potential to become productive citizens.

Society has a vested interest in seeing that they are fed, housed, and
educated.

Parents are expected to sacrifice so that their children can have
a better life and can make a success of themselves.

But in antiquity children were non-persons.

Childhood was a time of terror—

1/3 of live births ended in death;

2/3 of children died before the age of 16.

Ancient Middle Eastern cultures denigrated children as nearly useless.

Even medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas taught that in a fire a husband was first obligated to save his father, then his grandmother, then his wife, and then, if he had time, the children.

During famine children were also last to be fed—survival of the fittest.

When my daughter Davy served in the Peace Corps in Zambia, Africa, she reported that when it was meal time men ate first, then the women ate, and then children got what was left over.

Survival of the greatest...survival of the best.

In Jewish culture, children were considered the least among the members of the household.

A child was like any other piece of property in one's household:
an object to be taught the household's craft or vocation.

Children were needed in order to continue the household's name and heritage.

Children were property to be raised rightly so that when one was too old to work, one's children would become the parents' social security—
taking care of them in old age.

When Jesus tells his disciples to become like little children,
he insults them,
he insults their culture,
he insults their values.

It was only when children reached maturity that they finally had value—
at least the boys.

V

This continues to be true in some cultures today.

The world is not interested in a world where rank and stature don't matter.

We make victims out of the powerless.

In this simple act of embracing a child and placing her on his lap in the presence of the disciples,

Jesus made—

and continues to make—

a statement about the nature of God's love and God reign that everyone in that room—

and everyone in this sanctuary—

could understand...

even the child among them.

What is Jesus' message in such an extraordinary welcoming gesture?

It is the same as in Matthew 25:40:

*"As you have done it unto one of the least of these,
you have done it unto me."*

Jesus teaches us that greatness is not found in self-adulation and self-promotion.

True greatness comes,

not as the world defines it—

in success,

wealth,

position,

power,

and fame.

True greatness, rather, is found in reaching out selflessly to others,

as Jesus himself did,

even to the point of dying on a cross for our eternal sakes.

And yet it is not only reaching out to others in general,

but to those considered the least in the world we live in,
and likewise being reached out to by them,
all in the name of Jesus.

To *welcome* a child is to extend the simplest of acts to an individual whom society dismisses as perhaps cute but ultimately insignificant,
someone who lacks any accomplishments,
greatness,
status,
or pretensions.

Jesus invites us to welcome every person in the same manner,
without regard for their worldly importance.

To welcome another person in that way,
Jesus says,
is to welcome him,
and in turn to welcome God the Father who sent him.

VI

Is this idea of servanthood realistic and practical?

Was Jesus off base when he told his disciples to stop thinking about being great and start getting serious about serving the least among them?

I don't think so.

The secular business world has picked up on this lesson of Jesus.

In 1970, A.T. & T. executive Robert Greenleaf wrote an essay entitled "The Servant as Leader."

Greenleaf did not write his essay for pastors and church leaders—
it was for executives in the hard-nosed business world.

He coined the term "servant-leadership" and spent the last 20 years of his life writing and lecturing about servant-leadership.

He also served as a consultant to institutions like MIT, the Ford Foundation, Ohio University, and many others.

In his forty years of management, he discovered that the great leader is first and foremost a servant to others

True leadership emerges from individuals whose primary motivation and desire is to help others and empower others to reach their full potential.

Good leaders, Greenleaf observed, desire to serve others first.

Servant-leadership transforms people;
it heals and makes a difference.

It brings meaning and purpose to others.

This is not idealistic mumbo-jumbo.

Consider the number of companies that have adopted servant-leadership as part of their mission statement—

Starbucks,

Marriott,

Men's Wearhouse,

ServiceMaster,

and Southwest Airlines, to name but a few.

Today we hear a lot about leadership “styles.”

Servant leadership is not a style.

It is about the motivation behind the thoughts, words, and actions.

When Jesus challenged his disciples to practice servanthood,
he was challenging them to be Christian leaders.

When we read the words of Jesus today,

he is giving us the same challenge.

Christian faith not only believes,
it serves.

The original 12 disciples just did not get it.

They had conventional ideas about what greatness was.

I am not sure we get it either.

Often there is a disconnect between what we say we believe and how we live.

Jesus challenges us to get our hands and our hearts dirty helping others with no expectation of anything in return.

Jesus challenges us to look at the world and ask,
“How can I help my fellow human beings?”

Through servant-leadership, we discover the true meaning of greatness.

VII

I imagine that toddler climbing all over Jesus,
squirring on his lap,
pulling at his beard,
sticking her fingers in his ear or mouth.

And I can hear Jesus laughing,
sharing that precious moment with that child,
as he tries to get out his next words to his disciples:

*“Whoever embraces one of these children as I do embraces me,
and far more than me—God who sent me.”* (The Message)

To whom would Jesus reach out,
take in his arms,
and place before us here this morning?

Would it be Aylan Kurdi, a 3-year-old refugee from the civil war in Syria, whose lifeless body washed ashore on the beach in Turkey, and the picture of it was seen around the world?

Would it be Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old Cleveland boy who was shot dead by a police officer as he played in a park with a toy gun?

Would it be Gavin, Niall, and Noah Pilkington of Bellefontaine, Ohio whose mother allegedly killed them because she was jealous of the attention their father gave them?

Would it be Ahmed Mohamed, a nerdy 14-year-old from Irving, Texas, who built a digital clock, brought it to school, and then was arrested, expelled from school, handcuffed, finger-printed, and interrogated for hours on suspicion that it was a bomb?

Would it be children right here in Portland who are...
 lacking in love,
 suffering abuse and neglect,
 going to bed hungry at night,
 needing someone to welcome them with love and compassion?

Sisters and brothers, there are only two paths to greatness:
 the world's way and the way of Jesus.

Jesus says it has to do not with what we have and do and are,
 but with what we do for others because of **whose** we are.

When we welcome those with no status,
 those with no power,
 those with no capacity or claim to do likewise for us,
 we welcome none other than Jesus himself.

When we welcome him, we welcome the One who sent him—the living God.

This is Jesus' way to greatness...

**and this is the answer to the question
none of the disciples dared to ask.**

Amen.

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