

Redefining Greatness

Mark 9:30-37

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Today we have the pleasure and joy of witnessing one of the church's greatest sacraments, Baptism. It is a keen reminder of God's claim upon our lives. We have the added joy of witnessing a child being baptized because it reminds us that the power and efficacy of Baptism is not found in her having done anything to earn this rite but in her simply receiving it as an act of God's grace. So to the family, we say congratulations, to this church we say hallelujah for this blessed joy, and to the entire body of Christ who gathers with us today in many places and spaces, we say praise God from whom all blessings flow.

Friends, I've heard it said that you can't teach an old dog new tricks. They say it's impossible because the animal is too far gone, too set in its own ways, to adjust or reconsider is simply too much to ask. Well I don't know about dogs, but it certainly feels that way at times with humans, and most often this fact is reflected in the church. It's hard to get people to reconsider or push beyond the boundaries of their current understanding. If it's true for us today, I'm imagining that the same was true during Jesus' time.

In this morning's passage, we meet Jesus on the road. He had spent most of his ministry in Tiberius and around the Sea of Galilee, but today we find him traveling between Galilee and Capernaum. He's with twelve of his closest friends, listening to a first century iPod playing Willie Nelson's classic hit "On the Road again, On the road again, I just can't wait to get on the road again." But whereas Willie mentions making music with his friends, Jesus is making his march towards Jerusalem. And this is not just any journey. This is his last. The path he's on ultimately leads to the cross and Golgotha's hill. Jesus is busy trying to help his friends understand the fullness of his mission and the ministry to which they have been called.

The text tells us that Jesus wanted some intentional and intimate time alone with the disciples. As their teacher, he desired to be alone with his students to limit distractions and prepare them to receive what was sure to be a difficult message. Friends, there is no substitute for alone time with Jesus, and sometimes it's the alone time that gives us what we need to bear the news of difficult messages.

Jesus tells his friends that there are going to be some hardships before the hallelujah comes, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise again."

Now just to be clear and to be fair to the disciples, Jesus' words are about as radical and as prophetic and as ominous as the words Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. uttered on April 3, 1968, just one day before his death:

Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land!

Can you imagine being there that night? Can you imagine being one of the disciples on the road with Jesus? The impact of his words must surely have sent shock waves through the core of his friends. But this is where they were, and this was appropriate for the path they were taking to Jerusalem.

You see, on the road from Galilee to Capernaum, they would have likely walked past hills littered with crosses and persecuted bodies, which served as a constant reminder that the Emperor had one agenda, to "Make Rome Great Again!" Jesus and his community lived as occupied people in the Empire of Rome, and every few miles or so there was a constant reminder which began with the stench of death. This is what happens to those who attempt to upend or overthrow the current power structure.

It must have been a hard truth and a difficult sight for the disciples to process. They had been hoping and waiting for a king who would come to overthrow the Roman authorities, but their plans had not included him needing to die first. Surely they couldn't understand what Jesus was saying, and this was the second time he had mentioned this morbid message. The first was in chapter 8, then again in chapter 9, and he would soon do it again in chapter 10.

I can see the disciples there pacing steps behind Jesus, looking at the back of his head wondering what on earth Jesus was talking about. Surely that's what they thought, but no one had the courage to ask any questions.

They were fearful, afraid, and confused, and they did what people who are fearful and confused always do—they became distracted. They began majoring in the minor and minoring in the major. Instead of taking Jesus up on his attempt to create intimate and personal teaching time with his disciples, they sat on their concerns. Soon their inner turmoil began to manifest in other ways like, you guessed it, arguing about who was the greatest.

Now why the disciples' minds turned to arguing over greatness escapes me.

- Some scholars believe it's because they were jockeying to see who would take Jesus' place. He had just announced that he would be crucified, which means there would be a vacuum in leadership and one of them must fill it. Who would it be? Maybe that's why, but that seems a bit too advanced for the disciples I've come to know in Mark's Gospel.
- Other scholars contend that a few of the disciples were miffed at the fact that Jesus was playing favorites. He had just taken Peter, James, and John up the mountain to experience the transfiguration. It was these same three that he

had taken to Jairus's home to heal his daughter. Maybe the other 9 disciples were experiencing the FOMO affect. Maybe they were fearful of missing out and couldn't quell their discontent.

- The last possible suggestion is that the disciples played by the same rules some do in the church—when in doubt, fight it out.

So they argued, and despite their best attempts at containing the squabble, Jesus had heard them and now that they had reached Capernaum, he felt it an opportune time to bring the concern front and center.

Relaxing at the home of their host, Jesus asks, "What were y'all arguing about back there?" Friends, here we find another dilemma and difficulty in the church: instead of taking their challenges to the lord and sharing the angst or worry they felt, the disciples began tearing into each other. Isn't it just like us too. When we are afraid, when fear grips us, when we are faced with trouble, instead of going to Jesus, we argue it out amongst ourselves.

But here's the thing I like about Jesus: he had an uncanny way of meeting people where they were and then inviting them to consider taking a few steps along the road with him. He was capable of challenging people's way of thinking and viewing the world. In a non-threatening manner, he used his presence and God-given agency to help people remove the obstacles that separated them from the goodness and greatness that can only be found in God's will.

As much as he taught people, he also helped them unlearn ways of being that were not fruitful or faithful as citizens in the kingdom of God. Here's what I love about Jesus: Jesus is an invitational leader. He never demands; he invites people to experience a transforming encounter with God.

I can see him there. He sits down with the disciples and beckons them to lean in a little closer. It's kind of like this, in the same way a baby is born with legs but doesn't know how to walk. The disciples were in intimate relationship with Jesus but didn't know how to interpret or integrate his presence into their lives.

I can see him saying "because you are in danger of missing the major point, let me break things down in the way that you can understand. I don't want you to be left with any questions. God's ways are not our ways. God's work is not about competing to be great in the world's sense. God's work and God's call is different, and it turns the ways and wisdom of the world upside down and right side up. In God's kingdom, if you want to be first, you've got to serve somebody."

He offers them and he offers us an antidote to the world's madness. In God's kingdom, in God's economy, there is room for everybody to be great. Jesus whispered to the disciples the same truth he would later reveal to us. Again in the words of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in his famous Drum Major Instinct sermon, God is reminding the world:

Anybody can be great, because everybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and your verb

agree to serve. You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don't have to know Einstein's "Theory of Relativity" to serve. You don't have to know the Second Theory of Thermal Dynamics in Physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love.

I would say you need a soul powered by love. Why would Jesus pull the disciples to the side? Why then, what message did he want to make sure he got across? Friends, He wanted to make sure they knew and that you and I know.

Greatness is not a competition; it's part of your composition. It's in your DNA, and what makes it real is not that your Christian resume or life circumstances need to be compared to another's. What makes you great is that you are made of the stuff God is made of, and in each of us, there is a God-sized morsel that calls and shapes and creates opportunities for us to be great. Your greatness is not about outshining or overshadowing another; your greatness is found in your being open and willing to welcome and serve even the likes of a child.

Jesus chooses a child for various reasons. But everything they needed to do God's work and to honor God's will in their lives was already right there with them. However, they didn't know how to use it. For many of us, greatness will begin not by our learning something new, but by unlearning some of the unhealthy and unhelpful traits learned in the world. The world pits God's children against one another instead of placing them shoulder to shoulder beside one another to live God's will in the world.

Friends, I'd say if you want to make this or any other country great again, you must begin with turning people back to the message of God's love. You have to invite them to unlearn the messages of racism, hatred, xenophobia, and bigotry. God's love has already provided everything we need not only to be great within the work God has assigned to our hands, but also to support the greatness that already lies within each of our sisters and brothers.

It's kind of like this, in the same way a baby is born with legs but doesn't know how to walk, the disciples were in intimate relationship with Jesus, but didn't know how to interpret or integrate his presence into their lives.

- We are all created in the image of God, and God is within us all.
- Our basic underlying nature is to be loving, peaceful, balanced, and caring, compassionate and kind.
- Over the course of our lives, these natural tendencies become overlaid with fear, anger, sadness, envy, and insecurity.
- Over time these and many other emotions cover up our inner nature.
- It starts when we are children, as we receive good training from well meaning people who teach us how not to be honest with ourselves or others.
- And in the place of honesty and openness in relationships, we learn how to fake it till we make it. In the process of doing this, we lose touch with God and ourselves. We forget who we really are.

- We do not need to learn how to love and serve, how to forgive and be faithful.
- Our task is to unlearn those negative and harmful emotions/attitudes that plague our lives and cause us misery.
- As we let go of these and other hindrances, we rediscover our true nature as God's beloved children.
- We rediscover greatness has been there all the time, covered up and lacquered over by our fears and past pains.
- With God's help we realize that greatness does not have to be acquired. It's already there. It needs only to be revealed as we unlearn and release those things that separate us from the will of God.
- Who God is is not who we are. It is evidence of God's power and not our own, meant to be used for God's glory and not our own.

So we move from this place, trusting God to remove the obstacles that stand in the way, knowing that fear freezes and pain paralyzes us. But in this text and in our journey, we are constantly able to rediscover the gifts of God in our relationship with Christ.

Prayer

God, whose love calls us to service, remind us of the goodness that overcomes our cynicism, our power plays, our arguments, our rationality, our book-smarts, our ego, our desire to be great. Remind us of the time we served and grew, when we moved beyond where we thought we were able to go. Remind us of the times we have felt that we mattered to someone, sometime we felt acknowledged and lifted up because someone met us right where we were. Remind us of the solidarity that comes out of such experiences. And when we forget, O God, set before us a child, so that we might welcome what we can know of amazement and wonder and goodness.