

## True Greatness

Mark 9:30-37

How do you measure greatness? In sports, there are all sorts of statistics to use. You can use home runs, or batting average, or wins, or ERA in baseball. Or you can use newer statistics like WAR, Wins Above Replacement, that take into account more than just one thing. You can use Olympic medals won, as we saw over the summer. Or you can just use the eyeball test, judging by what your eyes see who is great.

In recent years, this has taken the form of debating who is the GOAT, the greatest of all time. Although the acronym has its roots in Muhammed Ali, considered by many to be the greatest boxer of all time, it has gained popularity as an acronym and description for athletes of all sports.

Since it is election season, we also spend time debating which of the candidates for different offices are the greatest. There will be lists of the greatest US Presidents, and while there's generally a consensus on George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and FDR, there's debate about the rest of the list, especially the most recent ones.

Unfortunately, as we find out in today's Gospel lesson, the disciples of Jesus were not immune to the allure of greatness, although for them much more was at stake. They're still stuck with their old views of who the Messiah will be, and think thrones await them when Jesus gets where he's going. But that's not what will happen. Jesus had just made his second Passion Prediction—a prophecy of his betrayal, death, and resurrection. If they kept following him, they wouldn't get thrones, but crosses. But they didn't understand it and didn't like what they heard, so instead they argued about who was the greatest. To teach them (and us) a lesson in humility and true greatness, Jesus set a child

before them and explained that the way to be first is to be last, and the way to be last is to be the servant of all.

This is where it's important to know the historical and cultural context of the Scriptures. Because we think of being a child as a good thing. We think they're cute and cuddly. As work gets stressful and college classes get hard, we may long for the days when we had all of our needs taken care of, when we got to spend time coloring, when we had nap time built into our daily schedules. But that's not how it was in Jesus' day. Children were seen as foolish, lowly, powerless, helpless, and insignificant. In the first century, there's no other example of children being held up as a positive example.

What does Jesus mean by being like a child? The disciples are arguing about which one of them is the greatest, which of them is the most important, which of them is the most independent. Jesus instead tells them to be unimportant and dependent. A child is dependent on her parents to be fed and changed, cleaned and cared for, and can do nothing to help herself. The disciples needed to realize that they were totally dependent on God, on Jesus. It's only through Jesus that they can be truly great.

Like children, we cannot do anything for our own. All that we have has been given to us by God the Father, our creator. We can do nothing to get ourselves out of the dirt and mess of sin that we're trapped in. Left to our own devices, we'd never get free. We are totally helpless.

That's why Jesus came, and that's what the disciples didn't understand. They still thought they could do something to get God to love them. Instead, Jesus showed them they were

loved no matter what. Jesus showed them they were great in God's eyes, and that's what mattered.

That's what it means to turn and be like a child. It means to give up any thought of doing things on our own, and instead approaching God as a child approaches a dear father. It means recognizing our inability to change our condition on our own, and just trusting in God. It means giving up arguing over who is the greatest, and instead recognizing our own insignificance.

The world's philosophy is that you are "great" if others are working for you, but Christ's message is that true greatness comes from our serving others. If Jesus spoke in Aramaic, then there may also be a deliberate wordplay, for the word for child is the same as the word for servant in Aramaic—talya. If one wants to be first, he must be last of all and the servant/child of all.

Jesus, however, is saying to his disciples, his representatives, that they are to receive and so serve a child such as the one present for his sake. In serving the child they are in fact serving Jesus, and this of course reverses the ancient protocol where slaves and children, indeed all the subordinate members of the household, were to serve the male head of the household. To welcome the child is to welcome Jesus. To refuse the child is to refuse Jesus. It is Jesus' way of engaging the disciples' imaginations, planting a seed in their hearts, that true greatness comes from humility.

It's also career fair season here at Iowa State, and talking about greatness as a bad thing seems like the opposite of what you're taught to do there. You have to make sure you sell yourself well to the different companies, showing that you think you're the greatest, and they need to hire you so they can be the

greatest. Companies try to show why they're the greatest to work for, wining and dining prospective applicants. But to really be successful, you have to know who you are. True humility means knowing yourself, accepting yourself, being yourself—your best self—and giving of yourself for others.

We're still near the beginning of the school year. If you go to a graduation at the end of a school year, though, you'll often see something happen that shows our dependence on others. Instead of just having the graduating students stand, the school officials will often have parents and grandparents, family and friends stand to recognize their support. While a student graduating comes through how they do on their papers and tests by themselves, they don't do it alone. It is only with the help, support, and encouragement of family and friends that students can be successful.

True greatness comes from that. We don't believe on our own. The Holy Spirit creates and sustains faith in us through hearing the Word and receiving the Sacraments. The Holy Spirit doesn't just work through pastors and Sunday School teachers, though. Faith is sustained through family and friends, as children watch their parents and learn from their faith example.

Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would be first, he [or she] must be last of all and servant of all" (Mark 9:35). Later, he told them "For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as ransom for many" (10:45). Jesus took it one step further and became slave of all. In Philippians 2 we read:

"Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being

born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:5-8).

Jesus is the ultimate G.O.A.T.—the Greatest of All Time. Yet he humbled himself to the point of death on a cross. He died so we would not perish for eternity. He became the scapegoat, taking our blame and carrying our shame, so we could be forgiven. He became a slave so that we could be set free. Jesus is the greatest who ever lived—and he gave it all up for you!

In this way, we are called to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters in Christ. We are called to love and serve our neighbors because God first loved. We are not supposed to “lord it over” each other or get puffed up with pride and importance. We are to become as children, as slaves—as Christ. In the Church, we are all one Body. We belong to one another in Christ. That’s true greatness.

Pastor David Beagley  
Memorial Lutheran Church and Student Center,  
Ames, Iowa  
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