

“The Way To Greatness”

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Mark 9: 30-37

30 They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; ³¹for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, ‘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.’ ³²But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

33 Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, ‘What were you arguing about on the way?’ ³⁴But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. ³⁵He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, ‘Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.’ ³⁶Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷‘Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.’

Perhaps because there tend to be so many more denominations, one of the things that I notice when I pass through the small towns in Maine on my way to Nova Scotia are all the signs identifying the names of local churches. I have included a picture of one here “The First English Lutheran Church.” I show it because every denomination seems to have a “First Church.” There will be a “First Presbyterian, a “First Church of the Nazarene” “A First United Methodist,” a “First Baptist,” a “First United Church of Christ” and so on. It seems that everybody wants to be “First.” I don’t recall seeing any “Seconds” or “Thirds” or even any “Fourths.” Although a former professor of mine says that he once saw a “Twelfth Presbyterian Church.” That’s definitely an exception. Every church wants to be “First.” And if they can’t be first, they usually pick a different name.

The race to be first is nothing new for the followers of Jesus. In our reading from Mark’s Gospel this morning we hear how the disciples, were arguing amongst themselves about which one of them was the greatest. Which one was first amongst the disciples. If Jesus was the new great Messiah, the promised King they had always hoped for, someone was going to need to be his lieutenant. If they were his inner circle, there was a need to have an order of greatness. We don’t know how their conversation went, but we might imagine as they walked along the road that it went something like this:

Simon Peter may have started it all by saying something like, “Well, I am his right hand man. I am a part of the inner circle and the spokesperson of this group. I am the greatest.”

Peter’s younger brother Andrew might have then responded and said: “Well, let me remind you that I was called into discipleship first. In fact, I was the one who invited you to come to meet Jesus in the first place. I got you here so I am the greatest.”

Maybe it was then that the brothers James and John interjected saying, “You’re both wrong. Greatness is measured by the amount that you have sacrificed. If we had stayed back with our father Zebedee we would have inherited the family business. We gave all of that up to follow Jesus.”

And then maybe Matthew weighed in with, “Well if you want to talk about giving up money, then what about me? I was a tax collector. I had lots of money and a license to collect more. I left it all behind and therefore I am the greatest.”

It doesn’t take long before the quest for greatness can end up turning into some sort of competition.

When the twelve arrived at their destination, Jesus asked them what they had been talking about back on the road. It was a question meant to challenge them. Jesus knew what they had been talking about. When Jesus asks them the disciples are strangely quiet. They are embarrassed. It’s as if the disciples knew that they had been talking about something that they shouldn’t have been -something Jesus wouldn’t approve of. Arguments about who was the greatest were as puerile back then as they are now.

But they still happen don’t they? From the playground, to the stage, to the stadium, to the boardroom, to the classroom, to the arena of public opinion, the question of greatness and who is the greatest is always a matter of debate. Often these arguments become the basis for competition. People seek to prove their greatness by setting themselves over and against those around them. Now to be certain, there are places in our world where this type of activity is expected. We see it especially in sports and in business. Athletes aspire to be first at what they do in order to win the championship. Businesses aspire to be first and garner the greatest share of the market. Anyone who watched the Olympics this past summer knows all about the glory that this world loves to bestow upon people who finish first. Adorning people with gold and a crown of laurels dates back to Ancient Greece. Laurel wreaths were worn as a symbol of victory and heroism in battle. They were signs of greatness that elevated individuals from others around them.

Yet the problem occurs when we take this competitive spirit and channel it into those other areas of our lives where it was never meant to belong. It can happen in marriages, in friendships, in partnerships, in families, in churches. Places where people can become divided against one another because one person or one group of people feels they need to be first. Or maybe that they were the first on the scene and therefore are the greatest and deserve all of the accolades and privileges that come with that title -the title of being first. This competitive spirit can become a source of injustice and upset the balance in our relationships. Think about it, if someone is greater, then the playing field isn't level now is it? Sometimes we can do this without thinking. There is just an unspoken need it seems to brandish our superiority over another, which really speaks more to our feelings of inferiority than to the reality of our greatness.

It's like the story of this cattle rancher from Texas who was in Israel taking a tour of the Holy Land. One of the spots on the tour was a visit to a small farm in the north part of the country near The Galilee. The Texan was struck by how small the farms were compared to what he was used to back home. When he met one of the local farmers he said, "You know, back in Texas, I can hop in my Cadillac and drive the whole way around my farm and it will take me all day!" Upon hearing this, the old Jewish farmer said to the Texan, "Ah yes, I used to have a car like that too!"

You see, the perception of greatness, either the sense of importance we ascribe to ourselves or even the greatness we assign to others can end up distorting our realities and as a result our relationships. There is a communication break down. We never really get to know people, even people close to us and others never really get to know us.

Jesus was well aware of this breakdown in communication and the environment it created. He knew that his disciples had a distorted view of greatness and that they even had a distorted view of him. He kept telling them that he was going to be betrayed into human hands and killed but the disciples were afraid to ask him what he meant. They just don't seem to get it. They were so hung up on Jesus greatness and their relationship to that greatness, that they were unable to hear what he was really saying or comprehend what he was talking about. Jesus seemed to be aware of this. Every now and then just had to stop his disciples and re-establish the lines of communication with these little gems that would get his disciples to pay closer attention and listen more intently to what he was saying. To the ones who were so caught up in arguing about and determining who was the greatest, Jesus told

them and us what it is that makes for true greatness in the eyes of God. “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”

And then to drive that point home Jesus picks up a little child. Now back then a child was the least of all. A child had no standing, no wealth, they were not yet old enough to do manual labour. As soon as someone was old enough to do manual labour then he or she was working or married or both. Back then wasn't like today when childhood can last into one's teens, twenties, even their thirties and beyond. Children back then were the little wee ones who were often seen as nothing more than another mouth to feed. There was a good chance they wouldn't survive childhood. And the jury was still out on them because they had not yet proven their worth. Children were not the greatest. Children were not first. Children were last.

And it is one of the last, a child, that Jesus picks up before his disciples and says, whoever welcomes such a child welcomes me and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me. Jesus sought not to set himself apart from the child, he sought to see himself in the child and wanted his disciples to see the same and to see more, namely the very presence of the Almighty God. That's a revolutionary theology that Jesus is offering here. It's a theology of the last. In an age where gods were seen as all-powerful, immensely important and other worldly, here was Jesus, the one they believed to be the Son of God, picking up a child the last person you would expect and says, "Here I am and here is God." The time has come to stop competing and start welcoming. Stop arguing about who is the greatest and start talking about the value of others.

It was this kind of theology of the last made known in Jesus that the apostle Paul wrote about in his letter to the Philippians. In Chapter 2 he wrote:

"Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was⁵ in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross."

It's the moment in time when we witness the greatness of God becoming the last, the least, the servant of all. The life of Jesus transforms the way to greatness. It's something C.S Lewis wrote about in his book Miracles. Lewis said, "We cannot conceive how the Divine

Spirit dwelled within the created and human spirit of Jesus...but we can understand that if God so descends into a human spirit, and a human spirit descends into nature, and our thoughts into our senses and passions, and if adult minds can descend into sympathy with children, and humans into sympathy with beasts, then everything hangs together and the total reality, both Natural and Supernatural, in which we are living is more harmonious than we had expected. We catch sight of a key new principle, the power of the greater to include the less. Everywhere the great enters the little -the power to do so is almost the test of its greatness.”

Some are better than others when it comes to passing this test. Recently I read about a church in Dayton, Ohio, founded by the Rev. Dr. Daryl Ward, that decided to challenge the need to be first. I would say they're a church that has taken what had to say quite seriously when he said “you must be last of all and the servant of all.” They call themselves “Omega Baptist Church.” What is “Omega?” “Omega” is the last letter of the Greek alphabet. In other words, “Omega Baptist Church” isn't claiming to be “first” but last. It's a church that has decided to value the last. Omega Baptist Church is another way of saying the “Last Baptist Church.” Their understanding is that the church, the Body of Christ on earth, isn't called to be first...but last.

My friends we are here to welcome the last and the least and be reminded that this way, the way of God in Christ, is the way to greatness.

Thanks be to God.