

## *WHO IS THE GREATEST?*

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Text: Mark 9:30-37

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for 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." But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

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 who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." 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."

In the gospel reading this morning, the disciples are still struggling to understand what Jesus means when he talks about dying and rising again. This is the second time he's made that prediction. Last week was the first time, and if you remember, it didn't go so well. Peter got so worked up he actually took Jesus aside and yelled at him. This time, the disciples' have the opposite reaction. There's no yelling. They're all quiet. None of them says a word. But they're still confused as ever. They don't understand what Jesus is saying, and the reason they're quiet is because afraid to ask him any questions.

This is actually a pretty common thing in the gospels. The disciples are clueless about a lot of things. But in this reading, their confusion level is especially high. They're confused about why Jesus is talking about dying, and they're also confused about this issue of greatness. They're on the road to Capernaum when they start arguing with one another, and when they get to where they're going, Jesus asks them what they were arguing about. Again, they all go silent. None of them wants to admit that what they were arguing about was which one of them is the greatest. And we don't know exactly what they mean by that because Mark doesn't say. He doesn't tell us specifically what they were arguing about. But it's clear they were jockeying for position, they were puffing themselves up, and it's also clear that Jesus is not impressed.

He knows full well what they were arguing about. He probably couldn't help but overhear. So he calls them over and gives them a little reality check. "Whoever wants to be first," he says, "must be last of all and servant of all." Which is a lot gentler than what he said to Peter last week, when he referred to him as Satan, but it's still probably a little jarring. This is not what the disciples grew up believing. And if you think about it, it's not what most of us grew up believing, either.

Greatness, the world generally tells us, is about being the strongest, like a great athlete; or being the wisest, like a great leader; or being the smartest, like a great scientist; or being the most powerful, like a great nation. It's about rising to the top, dominating everyone around you, achieving what others can only dream of, and being the absolute best at whatever it is you do.

But Jesus is saying greatness is the opposite of all that, the antithesis of all that, and to illustrate his point, he scoops up a child in his arms and tells the disciples whoever welcomes a little one like this welcomes him, and whoever welcomes him, welcomes the one who sent him—in other words, God. And just like that, he goes from saying something a little bit odd—*in order to be first you have to be last*—to saying something completely bizarre. Because in that world, children didn't count for much. They were loved by their families, of course, but as far as society was concerned, they had no legal standing. They barely even counted as people. So how can welcoming a child make someone great? To the disciples, that's nonsense.

Or is it? What if Jesus was right and true greatness isn't what we think it is? Can you imagine if people tried to out-do each other in kindness and generosity—if those were our highest cultural values? What if we had competitions to see who could come in last so others could be first? What if there were reality TV shows where the goal was to get kicked off the island so someone else could win the prize money—someone who needed it more?

In this reading, Jesus invites us to think of greatness as something that lies, not in putting ourselves above others, but in serving others—especially the weak and the vulnerable, the ones who usually get pushed aside. He invites us to dream of a world where greatness is measured not by how much we have, but by how much we give away; not by racking up trophies and honors, but by being humble and compassionate; not by crossing the finish line first, but by helping others get ahead.

But I know what you're thinking: *That's sounds wonderful, but it's completely naive.*

The fact is, most of us have a hard time seeing greatness the way Jesus does. It seems so impractical. And honestly, most of us are pretty comfortable with a world that doesn't ask too much of us, in terms of prioritizing others—a world that doesn't expect us to be our brother's keeper. It's a lot easier living in a world like that, where we only

have to worry about ourselves. But here's the thing. As hard as it is to let go of that conventional wisdom we've all absorbed from the culture around us, it's even harder to dismiss what Jesus is saying. Because he not only preaches it, he lives it.

Remember—the disciples have their little argument on the road to Capernaum. But if you think about the larger sweep of the gospel, Capernaum is only a stop along the way to their ultimate destination: Jerusalem. So here they are, fighting about which one of them is the greatest as Jesus is literally on his way to give up his life for them.

And not just for them, but for us, too.

So if we want to call ourselves disciples, if we want to be worthy of that name, we have to take Jesus' teaching to heart. We owe him that much. And we may not be capable of loving as selflessly as he did because we're only human, but we can at least push back against the voices in our heads dismissing Jesus' vision as pie-in-the-sky and telling us the world just doesn't work that way.

And how do we do that? How do we push back? Well, there are three short prayers that pretty much sum up Christian life, and they can help give us the strength and the focus we need. The first is an acknowledgement that we can't do this on our own: "Lord, help us." The second is a plea for when we fall short—when fear and complacency overwhelm us: "Lord, have mercy." The third gives us hope that even when we do fall short, Jesus is still with us: "Thanks be to God." Because Jesus doesn't give up on his disciples—not in his time and not in our time—no matter how clueless we may be. He keeps showing us what true greatness is, and he keeps leading us toward it. Amen.