

Tracy Daub  
9/19/21—University Presbyterian Church  
Mark 9:30-37

## THE IMAGE OF GREATNESS

Have you noticed how not all mirrors are created equal? There are good mirrors and there are bad mirrors. Some cheap mirrors terribly distort our image. You walk into a public restroom and look at yourself in the mirror and think, “Yikes! Is that what I really look like?” Your complexion looks terrible. The outfit you thought looked so good on you at home now looks dumpy and frumpy. Some mirrors do not offer a good reflection of ourselves.

That is what the disciples do for us in Mark’s gospel. We see in the disciples a reflection of ourselves and the image is not very flattering. In Mark, the disciples come off as clueless and thick headed. Jesus will teach them about something or carry out some kind of miracle, but the disciples never seem to understand what he has just said or done. In today’s story, for example, Jesus tells the disciples for the second time about what awaits him as the Messiah: that he will be betrayed, and will suffer, and be killed, and how he will rise again after 3 days. The first time he shared this news with the disciples, Peter took him aside and told him to stop talking like that. Peter, like the other disciples, had an image of who the Messiah would be and what he would do for them, and a suffering Messiah, a dead Messiah, did not conform to their image.

But once again, Jesus tries to teach his disciples what it means to walk God’s way as the Messiah—a way not about dominance or coercion, a way not about power and wealth, but rather a way that involves service, humility, and suffering. But we can see that the disciples fail to grasp the message because just after this lesson, they begin to argue with one another about who among them is the greatest. You can totally imagine that the disciples saw Jesus as their ticket to

great things. Here they were, part of the Messiah's inner circle of friends. Surely great things were in store for them. And so they began to argue about who among them was the greatest.

Looking at the disciples we can no doubt see our own reflection. Greatness attracts us all. We may not aspire to be President of the United States or a Hollywood celebrity, but in our own modest world and lives, the allure of greatness is nevertheless still strong. We are drawn to all those things that society values as signs of greatness: to power, wealth, and status. We want to have our achievements recognized and praised. We hope our children and grandchildren will know the greatness that comes from worldly success through the colleges they attend, the jobs they get, and the money they make. And it's even better if we or our family members make it into the newspaper or receive awards for our wonderful achievements in life! Like the disciples, our own sense of greatness is affirmed if we should know or socialize with those prominent players of power and status in our community.

Here's the important thing to remember: Jesus actually *desires* for us to be great. Jesus wants us to know greatness in our lives. But Jesus completely *redefines* greatness. Jesus sits down and begins to teach the disciples what greatness is *really* about. He tells them that whoever wants to be first must be last. Whoever wants to be first must become a servant. And then to illustrate his lesson, Jesus takes a child in his arms and says, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me."

To those listening to Jesus long ago, this would have been a very perplexing scene. Jesus lived in a society that was heavily based on the idea of reciprocity. Relationships were rooted in the social and power dynamics of reciprocity—where you did something for someone with the expectation of that person doing something for you. But children were not able to reciprocate.

Children were powerless. And this powerless status made them the lowest in the social hierarchy of their society.

When Jesus teaches his disciples that those who wish to be great must welcome even a child, the weakest member of society, Jesus offers them and us a radically new understanding of greatness. Instead of the distorted image of greatness we find when looking into the mirror of society—an image based on money or status, on power or connections—true greatness can be seen when we gaze upon the way of Jesus: by how we care for the weak, share our resources, respect one another, forgive one another, serve one another, work for peace.

When Jesus brings that child into the circle of his disciples, he offers them an astonishing reversal of all their concepts of greatness and importance. The writer and preacher Barbara Brown Taylor notes that “[The disciples] wanted to know who was greatest, so he showed them: twenty-six inches tall, limited vocabulary, unemployed, zero net worth, nobody. God’s agent. The last, the least of all.” Taylor adds, “if we want to welcome God into our lives, then there is no one whom we may safely ignore.” (*Bread of Angels*)

There is no one we may safely ignore. And the measure of our lives, the greatness of our lives, will not be found in our scramble for status and wealth and accomplishments, but rather on how well we include and love and share with all those who go overlooked, who are discounted, who are powerless. The great Russian novelist Dostoyevsky is quoted as saying that the measure of a society is based on how well it treats its prisoners. This sentiment no doubt arises from Dostoyevsky’s own time of imprisonment. Who are those who are the weakest, the overlooked, the discounted, the unimportant in our world? A truly great society or a truly great individual is measured by how they treat the weakest members.

Jesus knows something really important about us. He knows we *can* be great. He believes we can be great. He came to teach us *how* to be great. Greatness is to be our life's ambition. Jesus offers us a radically different understanding of what it means to be great. And it is when we gaze upon the image of Jesus and his way that we can discover the reflection of greatness God knows we can be.