

Attaining Greatness

Mark 9:30-37

³⁰ They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, ³¹ for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise." ³² But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him.

³³ And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you discussing on the way?" ³⁴ But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. ³⁵ And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." ³⁶ And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me."

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, once upon a time when everything could talk, the Wind and Sun fell into an argument as to which was the stronger. Finally, they decided to put the matter to a test; they would see which one could make a certain man, who was walking along the road, throw off his cape. The Wind tried first. He blew and he blew and he blew and he blew. The harder and colder he blew, the tighter the traveler wrapped his cape about him. The Wind finally gave up and told the Sun to try. The Sun began to smile as it grew warmer and warmer; the traveler was comfortable once more. But the Sun shone still brighter and brighter until the man grew so hot, the perspiration ran down his face, he became weary and setting himself on a stone, he quickly threw his cape on the ground. You see, gentleness had accomplished what force could not. I found this illustration in a section of Aesop's fables from my university textbook about children's literature.

This particular story reminds me of this morning's text. This time it is not the Wind and Sun arguing about who is the greatest, but Jesus' disciples, most likely James and John (Matthew 20:20ff), but I would not be surprised if the other disciples added their 'two cents.' In the end, however, Jesus tells them how to attain greatness in the kingdom of God, and it is not by being the biggest blowhard or the loudest hothead but by becoming the servant of all.

I. Seeking Greatness

This portion of Mark's Gospel presents us with a paradoxical series of events. It starts at the beginning of this chapter with the story of the Transfiguration. Three of Jesus' disciples, Peter, James, and John, saw Jesus in full glory as the Son of God. The implications of this event are staggering. This event also included the appearance of two of the greatest Jewish heroes

conversing with Jesus. Just hours, probably no longer than a day after this incident during which the disciples fell on their faces in fear, James and John argued about who is greatest. They had stood in the presence of greatness and yet failed to understand the ridiculousness of their argument. Imagine standing in the presence of two of your greatest heroes and then arguing with your coworker about which of you is the greatest. And another thing, this will be important in a few moments, the three men – Jesus, Moses, and Elijah – were great by becoming servants.

Follow the narrative down from the Mount of Transfiguration, and Jesus finds His remaining disciples embroiled in an argument with the scribes. The disciples have been unable to cast out an evil spirit who rendered a young man mute from birth and afflicted him with epilepsy. Jesus commands the spirit to depart and it obeys almost immediately. And yet contrary to what the disciples had witnessed, they argue about who is greatest.

Move ahead a few more hours and Jesus repeats what He had told His disciples previously. He has an appointment in Jerusalem where He will be betrayed, crucified, and raised. He goes because He came to serve but the disciples do not understand. This revelation alone should have put a big damper on the disciples' debate.

Some biblical scholars point to this confusion as one of the proofs of Jesus' identity as the Son of God. How, you might ask, could this be the case? The disciples could not grasp the mystery, the fullness of what He was telling them. They had no measuring stick. "Okay, so you are the Son of God. Good, now how do we claim the seats, one at your right hand and the other at your left hand when You come into Your kingdom?" I can picture Jesus slapping His forehead with the heel of His hand and replying, "Goodness, you still don't understand?"

The disciples argued about who should be the greatest. What is it that people need to be at the top of the heap? Do you remember playing "king of the hill" as a child? We would fight to reach the top of a mound of dirt, pushing, shoving, and knocking everyone else down the hill. Once we reached the top we would stand victorious, gloating over the lesser mortals. What makes us this way? James explains in today's epistle, "But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice" (James 3:14-17).

I wonder what criteria the disciples used to make their argument – responsibility within the group, years with Jesus, order of their calling, number of converts won, number of sermons preached, height, who could shout the loudest, or just plain desire. I want it!

S. I. McMillen, in his book *None of These Diseases*, tells the story of a young woman who wanted to go to college. Her heart sank when she read the question on the application that asked, "Are you a leader?"

Being honest and conscientious, she wrote "No," and returned the application, expecting the worst.

To her surprise, she received this letter from the college: "Dear Applicant, A study of the application forms reveals that this year our college will have 1,452 new leaders. We are accepting you because we feel it is imperative that they have at least one follower."

I find it revealing that the disciples declined to answer what they were arguing about when Jesus asked. Where was their leader, their self-appointed spokesman? I think they were a little embarrassed and guilty. After what they had just witnessed and heard, how could they think that Jesus would not know? Did they suddenly realize that they stood in the presence of the greatest of the greatest, the Lord of lords, and the King of kings? That must have finally put things in perspective!

II. Sacrificing for Greatness

I find another irony in the situation – the One who is the greatest, the One who has all the glory and honor, the One before whom everyone should fall on their faces in homage, gave it all up. That's right! He voluntarily stripped Himself of His marks of honor and became a servant of all. Who has ever heard of such a thing? Isaiah writes: "Who has believed what he has heard from us" (53:1)?

Jesus underscores a previous lesson about service, by declaring: "Whoever wants to be first must be the least and servant of all." Ideas of service are firmly connected with discipleship in Mark. Therefore, the disciples, or "learners," should follow the model of discipleship the good teacher sets forth. Imagine years ago when we were playing "king of the hill," that the one who reached the top extended his hand and helped the other children up. That might ruin the game but everyone could stand at the summit and admire the view. There would be many fewer cuts, scrapes, hurt feelings, and crushed egos. Discipleship beckons us to emulate Jesus by welcoming and serving others, even children, the least, the lowliest. Can you imagine anyone who has less power and authority than a child? And yet, those who perform such service will not just have served others, but they will have served Jesus and ultimately, God. Once again, James writes in his epistle, "But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace" (James 3:17-18).

One day Philip Melanchthon turned to Martin Luther and announced, "Today, you and I shall discuss the governance of the universe." Luther looked at Melanchthon and said, "No. Today you and I shall go fishing and leave the governance of the universe to God."

Jesus urges His followers to attain greatness by the recognition of every person – even the homeless among us – as a person for whom He came and for whom he died. Thus, in welcoming such a one, they and we welcome Jesus. And in welcoming Jesus, we welcome God.

At my previous congregation, once a month the men's Saturday morning Bible study would assist with the breakfast for the homeless at Immanuel Lutheran Church in downtown Pensacola. For me, this service was a lesson in humility. We left the comforts of Gulf Breeze to serve breakfast to someone with holes in the soles of their shoes, with all their worldly possessions stuffed in a bag or backpack, who look on oatmeal with raisins and egg casserole as a treat, who scour the tables for cast-off clothing that fits. Serving led me to realize how wonderfully I have been blessed for no good reason of my own. However, more importantly, it makes clear that faith reveals itself in service, that discipleship manifests itself in action.

Fifteen years ago, in 2006, Dana Reeve, widow of actor Christopher Reeve, died of lung cancer at age 44. Tributes poured in about her. She was an actress and singer in her own right, but the praise was largely for the years of care, support, and love she gave to her husband after he was paralyzed from a horseback riding accident in 1995, and for her work on behalf of others through the Christopher and Dana Reeve Paralysis Resource Center, a foundation the couple created to help with spinal cord and other mobility-related injuries.

We might point out that in caring for her incapacitated husband, she was fulfilling her marriage vows – "for better or worse, in sickness and in health" – but many people give up and turn their backs to such a challenge. The stress and strain of a caregiver's life cause some to flee it. But Dana put aside her own goals to welcome and serve Chris in his new condition. And through the foundation both Reeves reached out to others who had been sidelined by injuries or other causes. Chris might have boasted once of playing "Superman" and Dana might have boasted in her career but in the end, they attained greatness through service.

My oldest daughter recently sent me a new book titled *The Cult of We*. It is the story of the young entrepreneur who established WeWork. You may have read about him in the newspapers. The young man rented office spaces to the millennial generation. He envisioned a complete life plan, blurring the distinction between work and life. He made a good start. In the beginning, he was charitable, giving to various causes and supporting those who worked for him. However, as he became increasingly successful he lost sight of his plan. His goal “morphed” into becoming the biggest, the best, the fastest growing. The more money he gathered, the more he needed. The bigger he got the more he forgot those who worked for him, the less he gave to charity, the more he set aside for himself. He believed his own press. You guessed it! Everything collapsed around him. He went from best office manager to biggest fool, from best salesman to biggest con artist, from best boss to biggest disappointment.

I told you several months ago about my one-point sermons. What is my one point for this morning? The measure of success in the kingdom of God is the opposite of our experience. We have been redeemed by Christ, reborn through baptism and faith. We are called upon to serve God. We need to become loving servants -- strong and meek, wise and humble, faithful and obedient.

We honor Christ as both God and man, but most importantly that He chose to become the servant of all. He could have boasted of his glory as the Son of God, the riches of heaven, his majesty as co-creator, but in the end, He pointed to His sacrificial death. The apostle Paul reminds us: "... let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Colossians 3:15-17).

This is also the description of our discipleship! I close with another quote from James, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you" (James 4:6-10). Amen!

May the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Soli Dei Gloria!

