**September 12, 2018**

**Mark 9:33-37; Psalm 1**

Daniel Gilbert is a Psychology professor at Harvard University whose scientific specialty is happiness. He spends a great deal of time and money trying to discover what you and I probably already know, which is that what we think will make us happy doesn’t actually make us happy. We think that we will be completely satisfied if we buy a new toy or a new dress or redo our kitchen. Those things *may* make us happy for a little while, but it doesn’t last. The reason for such short-lived satisfaction, researchers say, is that our brains adapt quickly to whatever new, pleasurable things we have, but they quickly become ordinary in our brain’s processing, and we lose the pleasure boost it sent when the item was new. So then our brain starts looking for the *next* thing that we think will make us happy, fueling an ongoing, disappointing pursuit of happiness.

In a 2004 TED talk, Dr. Gilbert showed that one year after a life-changing event, new paraplegics are equally as happy as those who won the lottery. In fact, his research showed that if something is more than 3 months in the past, it has no bearing on our happiness… [[1]](#footnote-1) The pursuit of happiness is then not just ongoing and disappointing, but fleeting and illusive.

The disciples thought they knew what they wanted. They thought that each of them wanted to be the greatest. This argument is an interesting commentary on the human ego: here were these average joes from Galilee – fishermen and tax collectors – bumbling idiots who never got Jesus’ questions right – *they* equated *their* self-esteem and significance with *Jesus’* fame and accomplishments. So Jesus called all of them over to set them straight… again. “Whoever wants to be first will need to become last of all and servant of all.” He asked them, “Do you see this child?” whom he had gathered in his arms. “When you welcome one such little one, it is as if you have welcomed me, and not only me, but the one who sent me,” who is, of course, Almighty God.

In this statement, Jesus threw their argument to the wind. He didn’t need to say, “you’re missing the point.” He moved the conversation when he identified with the vulnerable and the powerless, not the greatest or most powerful. If you want to find me in the world, in your daily lives, don’t focus on *your own* importance. Whether or not you are great is of no consequence. Instead, find ways to open your arms and serve the least among you. “If you want to be great, you need to become the servant of all.” Greatness, according to Jesus, is about humility and service, not status or fame or wealth.

If they had paid attention to any of what Jesus had said or done, this should have come as no surprise. This was exactly what Jesus modeled for them. It was how he lived his own life. Jesus Christ, the greatest of all, Son of Man, Son of God, lived and worked amongst the world’s castaways. He ate with sinners and tax collectors. He spoke with women and foreigners. He healed those who were broken. Jesus, our Savior, the Son of God, Creator of the Universe, King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Jesus, the rightful ruler of Earth and Heaven, paraded through the world and into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday without the “great” royal fanfare because he did not separate himself from the people he loved. His leadership and his living never separated him from the least of these. He was crucified because the purported “greatest” leaders of the day couldn’t handle the threat he posed. In an ultimate demonstration of how the greatest can serve the least of these, he died to save the world’s sinners – the lost and broken, the hungry and hopeless, the disciples, you and me.

Bennett Sims, an Episcopal bishop, wrote in Servanthood, “The paradox of greatness is true not because Jesus said it. Jesus said it because it is true.” Jesus taught the truth. Servanthood was and is true for all people in all settings at all times and in all relationships. This should be the lens through which we all look at life and determine the priorities of our lives. It is the path to genuine greatness – in our marriage or partnership, in government and leadership, in business and commerce. Through servanthood, “Jesus reveals a way of life, not just a way of being religious.” [[2]](#footnote-2)

Jesus linked greatness to servanthood exemplified by hospitality in this passage. To be truly great, the disciples were invited to welcome a little child. Someone who probably had sticky hands, was obnoxious at times, and needed a lot of help each day. If they dared to be hospitable to a little child, they would have to make a lot of sacrifices. Their lives would be disrupted. They couldn’t just follow Jesus around willy-nilly; they would need to stop for nap times and make more time for play. They would need to be the leaders and the role models and the boundary setters, as well as be the providers and the grace-givers and the forgivers. I don’t know many bachelors who would give up their chosen lifestyle in order to offer hospitality to little children.

Our church has dozens of children and youth on our membership roles. Most of these students and their families attend worship irregularly through the year. We say that we want them to come to church every Sunday, yet how are we offering them hospitality? How are any of us or each of us making the sacrifices necessary to truly welcome the sticky fingers and late sleepers and football players and ice skaters into our community? How are we supporting the weary parents? Are we just asking them to join us as *we* are, or are we willing to make the necessary changes to truly provide and care for them? Hospitality requires sacrifice and servant leadership. Do we have what it takes?

If we pursue Christ’s idea of greatness, we will find happiness. In the Bible, happiness was not equated with getting what you want. Happiness was a state of blessedness. The happiest people are those who know who they are and know that they belong to God. Just as the psalmist wrote, “Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked or sit in the seat of scoffers, but their delight is in the law of the Lord.” So “happy are those” who love God and love neighbor. “Happy are those” who care for the least of these. For happy are those who lose themselves in servanthood. Happy are those who are caught up in something greater than themselves.

The writer Willa Cather engraved on her tombstone: “That is happiness, to be dissolved into something complete and great.” Christians talk about our greatness wrapped into Christ’s resurrection and our eternal life, then find ourselves waiting for that “great” day when all will be well. But we do not need to wait for this kind of happiness until death; we can pursue this now with God’s help. To be dissolved into something complete and great. To delight in the law of the Lord… which is to love God and love our neighbor.

It doesn’t take a Harvard professor to tell us we can’t buy happiness. We can’t find it either through self-indulgence. The answer comes in reaching for the good that we know and offering ourselves in service to God. Our memory verse this month, Micah 6:8, gives us a roadmap of what to do. *What does the Lord require of you? To do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.* There is work to do in our lives and in the world around us. There are people and situations who need our service each moment of each day. We could be dissolved into something complete and great if we lift up the poor, if we speak against racism, if we have an honest conversation with a child, if we pray and read scripture each day. We can lose ourselves in pursuit of greatness when we treat strangers kindly and generously. We move towards greatness when we welcome all God’s children, regardless of how uncomfortable they make us or the sacrifices required to care for them. This is the service God calls us to do. This is the path to greatness.

1. https://www.ted.com/talks/dan\_gilbert\_asks\_why\_are\_we\_happy#t-241351 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bennett J. Sims, Servanthood, Cowley Publications, 1997, p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)