

"Servant of ALL"

Mark 9:30-37

September 20, 2015

17th Sunday After Pentecost

Many people desire to be great. Some people actively pursue greatness. What does it mean to be great? How do you measure greatness? If you want to be great in sports, it means having impressive statistics, many victories, and multiple championships. If you want to be great in school, it means getting good grades, receiving valuable scholarships, and achieving academic degrees. If you want to be great at work, it means having a high salary, receiving frequent promotions, and being recognized by your peers as being great. In all of these contexts, greatness is quantifiable. You can measure it. Greatness is also self-promoting. It makes you better or more successful than others.

What does it mean to be great in the Kingdom of God? Many would like to answer that question with the same measurable, self-promoting criteria. A great Christian is one who leads a holy life, doing more good things and avoiding more bad things. A great Christian is also one who is faithful, someone who is always in Church, always in Bible Class, and always volunteering. A great pastor is one with the most converts through his preaching and teaching, the highest attendance in his church, and the most money coming in the collection plates.

This measurable, self-promoting view of greatness may be all right out in the world and may even seem to be spiritual in the church. However, it is not true greatness. There's nothing wrong with the concept of greatness or efforts to be great. It's just that God defines greatness and how it is achieved in the Kingdom of God differently than we do.

The perversion of greatness as being something measurable which we do to set ourselves apart from others and to be better than others really goes back to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. What was the real temptation that confronted them? I don't believe it was to eat a new kind of fruit because it was tastier and better looking than the other fruit in the garden. They already had all the fruit they could possibly want or need. No, the real temptation was to become great – to become

stronger, more powerful, and in control – to become like God. Their sin was not just that they disobeyed the command of God. Their sin was that they wanted to be great like God.

That is still our problem today. We want to become like God. In fact, we want to be the God of our lives. Each of us wants to be in charge of our own little moral universe in which our will supersedes God's will and the importance of our needs surpass those of our neighbors. We want to be free, like Adam and Eve, to choose our will over the will of God and to love ourselves more than we love our neighbors. Every time we choose to violate a commandment of God, we are claiming to be greater than God.

The perversion of greatness continued after God promised to send a Savior to Adam and Eve. They no doubt expected this Savior to be great – as they defined greatness. They expected the Messiah to be militarily great and conquer their earthly enemies. They expected the Messiah to be politically great and establish a mighty kingdom for Israel. They expected the Messiah to be economically great and grant to them all the wealth and material blessings they desired.

That's how we believe God to be great today, too. God is great when He shows His power and does things for us. God is great when He overcomes our enemies, when He gains political victories for us, and, especially, when He answers our prayers by giving us the material blessings we desire.

In our Gospel reading for today, Jesus defines true greatness. He tells us how God is great and how we can be great, as well. In our text, Jesus has withdrawn with His disciples from the crowds and the big cities. He is no longer doing miracles and preaching to the masses. Now, it is time to reveal to His disciples the true nature of His ministry and what it means for those who wish to follow Him.

Jesus' greatness was going to be far different than the disciples, the Jews of that time, or the people of our present age would ever have imagined. Instead of conquering His enemies, Jesus would allow Himself to be handed over to His enemies. Instead of taking the lives of those who

opposed Him, Jesus would offer up His own life for His enemies. Instead of putting people dead in their graves, Jesus would come out of His grave alive.

Jesus showed greatness in humility. He came into this world as true God, but not to lord it over people. He took on human nature and became a man in every way. And not only a man, but a servant of all men. As Paul wrote to the Philippians, “Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.” (Philippians 2:5-7)

Jesus showed further greatness, not by sitting back and allowing faithful subjects to serve Him, but by serving people, including many who were using Him or opposing Him. He healed the sick, fed the hungry, delivered the demon possessed, and raised the dead. This was not a political ploy to gain support for His mission. It was the very essence of His mission. As He said, “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45)

And that’s His greatest display of greatness. Jesus showed greatness, not by living for Himself, but by dying for others. He came to give His life as a ransom payment for sinners. That was all part of the Father’s plan and Jesus was perfectly obedient to it. Jesus was great by submitting His will to His Heavenly Father’s will. As Paul puts it, “And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2:8)

The only exciting and glorious greatness that Jesus would show was by rising from death to life after three days in the grave. But even that was done, not for Himself, but in obedience to the Father’s will and for the benefit of others would face death and the grave.

Despite using very simple language and being very direct in His teaching, the disciples did not understand Jesus’ teaching on greatness. And, since lack of understanding often begets fear, they were afraid to ask Him for clarification. Rather, as they continued their journey to Capernaum, they had their own private discussion about greatness and which of them was the greatest. When asked by Jesus what they were discussing on the way, their fear changed to silence and they said nothing.

Even though they didn't ask for a definition of greatness to be a follower of Jesus, Jesus gives them one anyways. He says, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all. Greatness for those who call themselves Christians is, first of all, not gained by seeking to be first in the way the world sees greatness – through accolades, awards, achievements, and the acquisition of stuff. Greatness for Christians is found in being humble in spirit and not caring about self-glorification.

Secondly, greatness for those who call themselves to be Christians is to be found, not in their words, but in their actions. Christians are not simply to talk the talk of God's love and mercy, but to walk the walk as well. Greatness for Christians is found, not in serving self or in being served by others, but in serving. This service involves, not only our family, our friends, our fellow church members and those who like us and are like us, but it involves all: the good and the bad, the friendly and the unfriendly, the Christian and non-Christian, the family and the unrelated – all. Jesus goes so far as to place a child before them – someone considered unimportant and worthy only of serving – and says, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me." We are to serve even the unimportant and those who should serve us.

How can we possibly do that? It is Jesus "greatness" that allows us to be "great" in His Kingdom. Jesus' greatness – His service to the point of giving up His life on the cross – is what forgives us our self-centered attitude and our selfish sin. His death on the cross changes our status before God. Each of you is a wholly loved and totally accepted child of God for Jesus' sake. You don't have to compete with one another to be great. God has declared you to be great. Jesus' love and His service to you frees you from that competition and that worry about your worth. You are worthy in God's eyes for the sake of Jesus.

Jesus' resurrection from the dead and your connection to it by means of your baptism gives you a whole new life. The Bible says, "just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." (Romans 6:4) We are free now to serve others as Christ has served us. We are free to serve each other in church; free to serve our family at home; free to serve our classmates at school; free to serve our fellow employees at work. We are free to

serve even those whom we don't know and don't know us. We are free to be servants of all by the grace, mercy, and strength of the One who truly is the servant of all, Jesus Christ.

Let me be clear and say that awards, achievements, advancements and other human honors are not bad or sinful. We can be thankful when they come to us and rejoice when they come to others. Just don't be fooled into thinking that such things make you great. Your greatness is found in Jesus Christ who humbly lived, served, died, and rose again to forgive our sins, free us from their control of us, and give us a whole new life here on earth now and forever in heaven. Your greatness is shown as you follow the Lord in humble lives and sacrificial service of all. You may not be able to measure that greatness and it will not direct attention to yourself. But, in that, you will be truly great.

Amen