

## Greatest

Let's begin this morning by opening our Bibles to the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter of Mark. As we scan through this chapter, we see that the first section is about Jesus being transformed into a radiant being and talking with Elijah and Moses. Peter, in his normal impetuous manner, was ready to build three tabernacles for each of those radiant beings. The appearance of Elijah and Moses quickly ended and the voice of God spoke these words: **"This is My beloved Son, listen to Him!" (Mark 9:7 NASB)**

Later, Jesus was walking with His disciples and telling them of His death and resurrection. We read that they did not understand what He was saying and they had their own conversation. Let's look at the situation by starting to read with verse 30 of the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter of Mark.

**From there they went out and *began* to go through Galilee, and He did not want anyone to know *about it*. For He was teaching His disciples and telling them, "The Son of Man is to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill Him; and when He has been killed, He will rise three days later." But they did not understand *this* statement, and they were afraid to ask Him. (Mark 9:30-32 NASB)**

They did not understand. Jesus had simply told them that He would be handed over to men who would kill Him. He would then be raised from the dead three days later. I'm not sure what was not understood. Men will kill me. That is simple enough and straightforward. Not much there to be misunderstood. I will rise in three days. Now that might prompt questions but it is fairly clear to understand. Perhaps, like many men, they just didn't listen and thus did not understand. When they get to Capernaum, Jesus asked them about their conversation while they were walking.

**They came to Capernaum; and when He was in the house, He *began* to question them, "What were you discussing on the way?" But they kept silent, for on the way they had discussed with one another which *of them* was the greatest. (Mark 9:33-34 NASB)**

Jesus zeroed in on their conversation. This conversation that had interfered with them receiving His message about His coming death. We are now less than six months from the crucifixion and Jesus needs to prepare His disciples for the next phase of their assignment. They need to be ready to carry on after Jesus has completed His mission on earth.

Was Jesus disappointed? Perhaps. Jesus sits down and takes a small child into His lap to illustrate His point.

**Sitting down, He called the twelve and said to them, "If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all." Taking a child, He set him before them, and taking him in His arms, He said to them, "Whoever receives one child like this in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me does not receive Me, but Him who sent Me." (Mark 9: 35-37 NASB)**

The conversation about who would be the first is shut down by these words. **"If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all."** This has been and will continue to be the lesson we hear in Sunday schools and from the pulpits. However, this is not the message we hear and see in the world.

To be honest, this is not the way most of us live our life. It is not what we see as we look around our country. Greatness is about being number one, a winner, a success. It's about power, control, wealth, fame, reputation, status, and position. Have you ever seen the losing super bowl team dancing around Monday morning with two fingers in the air shouting, "We're number two, we're number two?" Probably not and you probably never will. Can you imagine a political slogan

about making America last or a servant of other countries? And who wants to be the servant of all anyway? That's for the poor and uneducated, minorities or foreigners, and those we can get away with paying less than a living wage. At least that's often how it works today. Being last and servant of all is not what we usually strive for. That's not the greatness to which we aspire. If being great, holding the number one position, means being last of all and servant of all, then we have completely misunderstood what greatness is really about. And the disciples don't understand greatness any more than we do.

Jesus asked them what they were discussing along the way. Jesus already knew. He did not get an answer only silence. Perhaps they were embarrassed. We notice that their discussion was in public as they walked along the road. Jesus waited until they were in private to bring it up. Jesus is directing them to silently reflect on the question of what it means to be great. This Jesus, who had just heard the voice of God saying: **"This is My beloved Son, listen to Him!"** is now reminding His disciples and us that His entire life on earth was one of service.

Jesus is not saying that we should not or cannot be great. He never says that. Rather, he is asking us to reframe our understanding of greatness.

What does it mean and look like for you and me to be great in today's world? That's the question.

Jesus answers that question by taking a little child in his arms and saying to the disciples, **"Whoever receives one child like this in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me does not receive Me, but Him who sent Me."**

We need to be careful here. Jesus does not say that greatness is in being a child and he doesn't say that greatness is in being childlike. Greatness is in welcoming the child.

Now that doesn't sound too difficult or challenging. Who wouldn't welcome a little child? But Jesus isn't talking about the child. He's talking about what the child represents. Children, in our society and culture are typically welcomed and adored. It may be difficult for us to fully appreciate what Jesus is saying here.

The child is a symbol for something else. The child is a symbol of vulnerability, powerlessness, and dependency. The child in Jesus' day had no rights, no status, no economic value. The child was a consumer and not a producer. Greatness, Jesus says, is in welcoming and receiving into our arms one like this, regardless of his or her age.

In the graphic judgement scene pictured in Matthew the 25<sup>th</sup> chapter, we see that greatness is not found in the things that what we have accomplished and gained for ourselves but in what we have done and given to "the least of these" (Mt. 25:40), the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, and imprisoned; the symbolic children in each of our lives. Think about a family member or a nurse's aide who bathes, changes, and cares for the elderly, the sick, the dying; she or he is a great one. Think about those who serve in the soup kitchens and food pantries, they are the great ones.

Greatness never puts itself in a position of superiority over another. It is not about me; my nation, my tribe, my people, my religion, my politics, my bank account, my house, my job, my accomplishments, my reputation, my status. Our greatness is revealed in our service and care of others regardless of her or his ability or willingness to pay, repay, or return the favor.

Listen to the words of Jesus found in Luke the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter: **If you love those who love you, what credit is *that* to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is *that* to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is *that* to you? Even sinners lend to sinners in order to receive back the same *amount*. But love your enemies, and do good, and**

**lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil *men*. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. (Luke 6:32-36 NASB)**

What did we just read? Jesus is talking loving others even when they don't love us, doing good to those who do not do good to us, lending without expectation of repayment, and, from Luke 14:12, inviting to supper those who cannot invite you back. He is describing greatness.

Greatness comes to us when we share with others who have nothing to share with us. Think of the young boy who shared his five loaves and two fish with 5000 people who contributed nothing but their hunger (Jn. 6:9). He was great.

Greatness comes when we forgive one who has neither asked for our forgiveness nor changed his or her behavior. Those who refuse to carry bitterness or envy toward another are great. When we respond to the needs of others, when we refuse thoughts and actions of hatred or prejudice then greatness comes. Our refusal to objectify the opposite sex or to join in jokes about minorities or foreigners is an act of greatness. When we overcome fear, tear down walls, and make room for one who is different, vulnerable, in need, then we are great.

Greatness is not something to be achieved or earned. It is a quality that arises within us when our lives are in balance and we step into our better selves. That's the life Jesus offers us. That's the life I want to live. I want to be great, don't you? This kind of greatness happen in the simple, ordinary, and mundane. It often goes unnoticed and unnamed but it's there. Greatness is always a choice set before us. It is the greatness of the last and the greatness of the servant of all. Is this the greatness that we have chosen?