

September 22, 2024

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 9:30-37 (NRSV)

pg. 45 NT Pew Bible

³⁰They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; ³¹for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” ³²But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

³³Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house, he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” ³⁴But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. ³⁵He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” ³⁶Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

Holy Wisdom, Holy Word.

Let Go of My Ego!

Cartoonist Charles Schulz had the amazing ability to write a sermon in a couple of square inches in the comics section of the newspaper. So much of Schulz’ work in his *Peanuts* serial was a social commentary on how to be a decent human being in our selfish and insincere world. While thinking about this morning’s text from Mark chapter nine, a particular *Peanuts* cartoon came to mind. Lucy’s little brother, Linus, asks his sister, “Why are you always so eager to criticize me?” The always self-assured Lucy responds, “I just think I have a knack for seeing other people’s faults.” Linus then asks Lucy, “What about your own faults?” To which Lucy responds confidently, “I have a knack for overlooking them.”

I think it's fair to say that our contemporary culture is obsessed with greatness. Consider the word that has recently become part of our everyday vernacular—G.O.A.T.—an acronym that means “greatest of all time.” Fueled by our ever-

competitive culture, we pour through top ten lists and rankings, attempting to assess who is the "greatest of all time." Who's the greatest basketball player, LeBron James or Michael Jordan? The greatest artist, Rembrandt or van Gogh? The greatest composer, Mozart or Beethoven? The greatest sculptor, Michaelangelo or Rodan? Greatest preacher, Billy Graham or Billy Sunday? Sadly, there was even a television reality show called *The Goat*, in which "reality stars" from a variety of reality shows competed for the title of the greatest reality show contestant of all time.

From the files of "the more things change, the more things remain the same"—Cambridge classicist Mary Beard shares in her 2023 book *Emperor of Rome* about how the ancient Romans, the empire into which Jesus was born, were obsessed with greatness. The Roman emperors projected and embodied the greatness of the sprawling empire of fifty million people from Scotland to the Sahara, from Portugal to what is now modern-day Iraq. Consider, for example, Augustus—who ruled during the time of Jesus' birth, and who is mentioned in Luke 2:1. When he was thirty-five years old, over forty years *before* he died, Augustus built an enormous mausoleum in the center of Rome. At 295 feet in diameter and 137 feet high, and occupying the equivalent of several city blocks, the largest circular tomb in the world is what Doctor Beard calls "an uncompromising symbol of autocratic power."

Augustus then wrote an encomium about himself called *What I Did* which, upon his death, was engraved onto two bronze pillars at the entrance to his tomb. Copies of this "relentlessly egocentric first-person narrative" were widely distributed throughout the empire. They complimented the tens of thousands of statues and portraits, and millions of coins, that bore the image of Gaius Octavius and all his elevated titles— *Caesar Augustus* (the exalted), *pontifex maximus* (chief priest), *princeps* (first citizen), *imperator* (commander-in-chief), *pater patria* (father of his country), and *divi filius* (son of a god).

Counter this with Jesus' subversive story in this week's gospel. Jesus says that the holy grail of human greatness that we honor, envy, and pursue—things like rank, wealth, fame, power, title, privilege, and prestige—can be a dangerous diversion.

They have but a limited capacity to nourish personal fulfillment and often lead us into a narcissistic idolatry of the self. Seeking greatness can prevent us from experiencing the fullness of God's kingdom. We get lost in the temptation to feed our ego, and not our relationship with our Divine Parent. To make his point, Jesus radically reversed our normal ideas about greatness. He said that little children epitomize life in God's kingdom.

Three different times in Mark's gospel, Jesus warned his disciples about the tragic end that awaited him in Jerusalem. And all three times they responded with objections, disbelief, and fear. After his first "passion prediction" in chapter eight, a story we explored during worship last Sunday, Peter rebuked Jesus: "Lord, this shall never happen to you!" But Jesus rebuked Peter for trying to prevent his sufferings: "You do not have in mind the things of God but the things of man." The way of God for Jesus was not power or greatness but suffering and sacrifice.

After another passion prediction, James and John, the Sons of Thunder as Jesus had nicknamed them, made a grab at greatness. They asked Jesus for positions of glory, to sit at his left and his right. The ten other disciples were indignant, clearly worried that James and John might gain some advantage over them. You see, there's nothing quite like your own insecurity about greatness to reveal your envy when someone else attains it.

And then in this week's gospel, after a third passion prediction, the disciples argued among themselves about who was the greatest. There's a bitter irony in this story, because in the previous paragraph they were unable to heal a little boy. Jesus responded to his disciples in two ways. First, he gave them a teaching: "Calling the Twelve to himself, Jesus said, 'If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.'"

Second, Jesus dramatized his teaching with some street theater. He placed a little child before the disciples. He then embraced the child and said, "Whoever *welcomes* one of these children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me." The parallel account of the same passage in Matthew 18 makes an important editorial change.

In Matthew's version, Jesus says, "unless you change and *become* like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

Having heard this subversive teaching, just one page later in Mark's gospel the disciples rebuked the parents who brought their children to Jesus so that he would bless them. "When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not *receive* the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.'" This was one of the few times in the gospels when Jesus got angry—when his closest disciples were dismissive of children.

To *welcome* a child is to extend the simplest of acts to an individual whom society dismisses as perhaps cute but ultimately insignificant, someone who lacks any accomplishments, greatness, status, or pretensions. Children need and expect our love and protection. Jesus invites us to welcome every person in the same manner, without regard for their greatness. To welcome another person in that way, Jesus says, is to welcome him, and in turn to welcome God the Father who sent him.

Similarly, to *become* or *imitate* children is to see our own selves in the same way. Instead of searching for significance in titles, honors, or professional successes, we simply enjoy the knowledge that we are ordinary people loved by an extraordinary God. The greatest honor that we can give Almighty God, said Juliana of Norwich, is to live gladly because of the knowledge of his love, like little children with loving parents. So, in welcoming and in imitating children, we receive or enter the kingdom, like we ourselves are beloved children.

Professor Beard says that the average Roman might not have been able to name their emperor, but they definitely would have known of the "terror of his power without limits." In her chapter called "Power Dining" about state dinners with the emperor, she draws a sharp contrast between the elite guests and the enslaved servants. Imperial dinners were spectacles of political power that were designed to glorify the emperor. They could include sadistic cruelty—recall how Herod beheaded John the Baptist on a dinner party dare. They were a glaring example

of what Beard calls "the division of humankind into those who *served* and those who *were served*."

The menial underlings who produced the lavish feasts included cooks, cleaners, butlers, dish washers, waiters, tasters, caterers, sommeliers, people in charge of invitations and table napkins, and then the after-dinner entertainment provided by the musicians, readers, "jokers," and pranksters. These would have included disabled people, says Beard, like the deaf and the blind, and in one story about the emperor Commodus, "two twisted hunchbacks smeared with mustard on a large silver dish."

It is precisely this sort of dehumanizing, cruel, and abusive social hierarchy, whether ancient or modern, that Jesus subverts in this week's gospel about greatness. So, what if we imagined that greatness wasn't about power and wealth and fame and all the rest, but instead we measured greatness by how much we share with others, how much we take care of others, how much we love others, how much we serve others. Can we imagine a world where people are regularly trying to outdo each other in their deeds of kindness and service? If there were nationally broadcast competitions to see who was willing to be last so that others could go first? If there were reality TV shows that followed people around as they attempted to help as many people as possible?

The definition of greatness Jesus offers initially seems crazy because it is so completely counter cultural. He calls us to imagine that true greatness lies in *service* by taking care of those who are most vulnerable—those with little influence or power, those our competitive culture is most likely to ignore. This without a doubt offers us a vision for our community life together. But it also applies more personally. How are we doing with measuring our success, our greatness, not by what we take in but by what we give away, not by the influence we wield but by the service we offer, not by accumulating more but by sharing what we already have, not by being first but by being eager to work hard in order to see others move ahead?

Make no mistake. This is hard stuff, absolutely and totally different than what the culture—whether in the first century or the twenty-first—tells us. As it was hard

for the disciples, it's also hard for us. They didn't understand what Jesus meant, and so fell into the trap of putting themselves ahead of everyone else. We often do the same, looking out for ourselves rather than others, trusting less in God for our security than we do our wealth, shutting others out rather than inviting them in, seeking our welfare rather than that of those around us.

But here's the thing: the road the disciples are traveling with Jesus when they fall into their petty arguments about who is the greatest is the road to Jerusalem. Even while his disciples misunderstand, don't believe, or just plain ignore what he is saying, Jesus is willingly walking the dangerous road to Jerusalem and risking death on the cross in order to reveal what true greatness really looks like—power in vulnerability, glory in suffering, salvation in self-giving.

Sometimes I think there are three short prayers that pretty much sum up the Christian life, and they came to mind as incredibly helpful to pray when we consider Jesus' teaching. The first is in response to his counter-cultural command that the first must be last and that true greatness lies in service. It is a humble prayer that acknowledges our weakness and limitations and need for God. It is as short as it is simple: "Lord, help us." The second comes when we fall short of our ideals, giving in to insecurity and fear and looking out for ourselves first. It is the simplest prayer of confession available to us: "Lord, have mercy." And the third is when we realize that even as we fall short, yet Jesus still died for us, still lives for us, still loves us more than anything: "Thanks be to God." "Lord, help us." "Lord, have mercy." "Thanks be to God." Three simple prayers that acknowledge God's greatness, our utter dependence upon God, and the overwhelming grace that flows from God. Jesus does not give up on his disciples—not then and not now—and still offers us a different vision of greatness that can lead us to imagine and work toward a completely different world.