

SECOND READING: Mark 9:30-37

pg 45 NT

[Jesus & his disciples] went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; 31 for 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.” 32 But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

33 Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” 34 But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. 35 He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” 36 Then 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.”

FIRST READING: James 3:13-18

pg 230 NT

¹³ Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. ¹⁵ Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. ¹⁶ For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. ¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. ¹⁸ And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for^[a] those who make peace.

This is word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

“What is Greatness?”

“Greatness”. “Greatness”. This is what is at the heart of our Gospel text today. It was at the heart of the arguments that the disciples were having as they walked the road to Jerusalem, and it is a very relevant subject to us in our time too. Have you ever really given thought about the meaning of greatness? What is greatness? Where does the desire for it come from? Who decides who is great? It’s important to ask such questions because as followers of Christ, we need understand that Jesus has a very different vision of greatest. And this vision results in a very different world that we are to help bring to earth. Let’s look more closely at today’s text.

Jesus is headed to Galilee with his disciples and he wants to go unnoticed, quietly. Rather than making a big scene, drawing big crowds and gaining a lot of media attention, Jesus wants to spend some critical alone time getting deep with his closest friends. He wants to them to understand what he and, by extension, they are about to do. So, he tells them for a second time (the first was when they were in Caesarea Philippi) that he will soon be betrayed, murdered, and will be raised on the third day. (*repeat*)

The disciples don’t get it. In fact, as Brian McLaren says, *“the disciples come across time and again as bumbling buffoons who were scoring very low on the “get it” factor.”*¹ And this must be because they assume, they are sure, that they are following a leader who is going to win. Their thoughts....Why would they have left their homes and families if they didn’t think Jesus would do this? Why would they have given up their vocations if they didn’t think that they’d be part of revolution against their oppressors? The Romans were violent, hateful, and crushing. They were going to need to be more so. Maybe they’d be guerilla fighters. Maybe they’d be part of Jesus’ militia. The disciples can only imagine themselves as victors, Jesus’ top generals, not ones who soon will be killed! In fact, they begin to argue, argue about who was going to be on top, who would dominate, who is the greatest.

Realizing they don’t get it, Jesus continues to try to make his message clear. They are going to Jerusalem to preach peace, acceptance, compassion and reconciliation. They will show that hate does not defeat hate, nor violence, violence. Justice is not be brought through injustice. Crushing power is not be undone by more crushing power. When violent men arrest him, he

¹ Brian McLaren. Sermon: "Going Up?" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rg9L43Ab2KE> (accessed 9-21-18).

will not resist. When they kill him, their evilness in wanting to kill a man of peace will be exposed. For all those who watch, Jesus' death will have its power in overturning their confidence in the systems of hate and fear and violence.² Elizabeth Johnson summarizes it so well. I will quote her once again... "*With moral indignation, concern for broken creation and a sympathy calling for justice, the power of God's love on the cross enters the pain of the world as a contagious lure to transform it from within.*"³ Boy, I love that! Jesus wants his disciples to know that he will not defeat the empire but will defeat a far greater foe, death. He will not use a sword, but a cross, an empty tomb and love. "*for 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.'*"

So once in Capernaum Jesus sits his confused disciples down and asks them what they had been arguing about. He, of course, knows they were arguing about "who is the greatest". They stay silent...embarrassed...and he is not impressed. He rebukes them, saying, "*Whoever wants to be first – that is, greatest – must be last and a servant to all.*" And then, using a wonderful object lesson, Jesus scoops up a child and puts his arms around them. Now, you need to know that a child of Jesus' time was a nobody, no one of account. Children were NOT to be seen and not heard, they were to be NOT seen and not heard. Invisible. There was no sentimentality about them, no thoughts about innocence or preciousness or future potential. Children were economic assets, expected to work. Parents loved their children, certainly, but they were property until they were either old enough to own property themselves, or to be sold in marriage. They couldn't speak for themselves. They had no influence. They were dependent, vulnerable, defenseless. The disciples know that this child was anything but great. So, there is stunned silence as Jesus just hugs him/her. Just imagine. He doesn't say a word at first! And then he says, "*Look. whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.*"

He is telling his disciples that their way of thinking is all wrong. All their assumptions about greatness, about him, about life, need to be turned upside down. "Life is not about competition and rivalry, but affection. It's not about how much you achieve or earn, but how much you

² Brian McLaren.

³ Elizabeth A. Johnson. *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*. (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 253.

love. Not about how you climb and scrape to get to the top, but about how you care and serve the ones like the child at the bottom.⁴ It's not about having the longest title, the most money, the most fame, the greatest beauty. It's not about winning friends and influencing people. It's not about putting others down and bullying them into submission. It's not about violence and power over, but peace, and justice, and compassion, and mercy, and... hospitality. Yes, hospitality. It's about welcoming those who are most vulnerable and lowest. "*Whoever welcomes a child, welcomes me,*" Jesus says. And "*whoever welcomes me, welcomes God who sent me*". (Pause)

So, this is what Jesus means by greatness. And it brings us to again consider the questions I asked you at the beginning... *What is greatness in our culture? Where does that desire for it come from? Who decides who is great?* I will be so bold as to answer them, at least as I see them. Greatness in the 21st c is the same as it was in 1st c Judah. It is all about power and fame, and position, and beauty and...of course, wealth. And the desire for it comes from...well, not God! Who decides who is great? We do. WE, unfortunately, do. What if, what if instead of being about power and wealth and fame and all the rest, greatness was measured by how much we share with others, how much we take care of others, how much we love others, how much we serve others, how much we welcome others? "Can you imagine if people nowadays tried to out-do each other in their deeds of kindness and service? What if there were nationally broadcast competitions to see who was willing to be last so that others could go first? What if reality TV shows were all about following people around as they tried to help as many people as possible?"⁵ Our world would be very different, wouldn't it? Consider what it would be like if the opinions we have of OURSELVES were measured not by our success or what we take in but by what we give away, not by the influence we wield but by our humility in serving, not by our being first but by our work to get others ahead? What if our security was really in God? Our lives would be very different, wouldn't they? They'd be GREAT, right?

Friends, this different vision of greatness is not an easy thing to grasp nor live out. It is as hard and confusing for us as it was for the disciples. But yet, this is Jesus' command of us. It is his vision for a new world, a kingdom world. We, as Jesus' arms, legs, eyes, ears and mouths

⁴ Brian McLaren..

⁵ David Lose. "A Different Kind of Greatness" <http://www.davidlose.net/topics/preaching-2/dear-partner-in-preaching/> (accessed 9-21-18).

in the world, need work toward it. And we need be bold in doing it. We need persevere in the task because “the road on which the disciples were traveling was the road to Jerusalem.”⁶ Jesus has already done the hard work for us on the cross. And we can point to the cross, trust its contagious lure to transform from within, and feel his living presence walking with us.

*I love the three short prayers with which David Lose sums up the Christian life. The first is in response to Jesus’ command that the first must be last and that true greatness lies in service. It is simply, “**Lord, help us.**” The second comes when it is too hard and we fall short, giving in to insecurity and fear and looking out for ourselves first. It is “**Lord, have mercy.**” And the third is when we realize that even as we fall short, yet Jesus still went to the cross for us, still lives for us, still walks with us. It is “**Thanks be to God.**”⁷*

Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

LORD HELP US. LORD HAVE MERCY. THANKS BE TO GOD. Amen.

⁶ David Lose.

⁷ David Lose.