

The greatest and the least \* Mark 9:30-37

March 19, 2023 \* Langford Community Church \* Graham Gladstone

There's an important question at the heart of our passage for today: what makes a person great?

Over the years, people have become 'great' by doing different things. Some people have become 'great' by conquering kingdoms, like Alexander the Great. You know how at various times in the OT the Hebrew people were conquered by Egypt and Babylon and Assyria; Alexander conquered all three and made them little parts of his grand empire.

Others have become great by uniting kingdoms. Charlemagne – literally 'Charles Le Magne' = Charles the Great – he conquered and united kingdoms and established what is essentially today Europe.

And then of course there's Brantford's own Wayne Gretzky, who became 'the Great One' with his unparalleled ability to score goals.

And you don't have to have the moniker 'the Great' stuck on the end of your name to be great. If you can amass power and influence and wealth and status in this world, then you are 'great' in this world's eyes.

But what about in God's eyes? What makes a person great from God's point of view? The answer to that question is found in today's passage so let's go there – Mark 9, starting in verse 30.

Mark 9, starting in verse 30, sees Jesus attempting to deal with a problem that He has had from the beginning of His ministry. When you go around healing people and casting out demons like He did just last week, it's easy to draw a crowd. And that's fine and good when you want to teach a crowd, but sometimes you need to focus your attention on a smaller group and that's what Jesus does here.

And so Mark 9, verse 30 says this: 30 They [Jesus and His disciples] left that place [where He had healed the demon possessed boy] and [they] passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, 31 because he was teaching his disciples.

He wanted to be alone with them so that He could teach them, so that He could prepare them, so that He could help them to understand what His ministry was all about. And here's what He said -

Verse 31 - ...He was teaching his disciples. He said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise."

Jesus wants His disciples to know that He is soon going to die. He is going to be betrayed into the hands of men, delivered over to evil people by someone close to Him and then put to death.

But He also wants His disciples to know that His death is not happening by accident. His death is not knocking His plan off course. His death IS the plan. Jesus is consciously choosing to go to the Cross. And by telling His disciples in advance, He is building up their confidence, so that when they see that He *died* just as He predicted, they will have confidence that He will also *rise* just as He predicted too.

And if you've been with us since the beginning of Lent, those words will sound familiar to you. Just one chapter back, Mark 8:31, Jesus tells His disciples: 'the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again' (Mar 8:31 NIV).

This is now the second time that Jesus has told His disciples that He is going to suffer and die and then after three days rise again. He clearly believes that this is something that the disciples need to know and so He keeps saying it over and over again.

Verse 32: But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.

Now to be fair, from the disciples' perspective, this *would* be hard to understand. What did Jesus mean that He would suffer and die and rise again? And if He knew that was coming, why would He CHOOSE to suffer and die and rise again? Why not flee from it? The disciples didn't get it.

But what's more, I don't think they WANTED to get it. They were afraid to ask Him about it – maybe because they didn't want to seem like 'the one dummy disciple' who didn't understand – but probably even more because they didn't want to know what Jesus' death would mean for their wellbeing.

And so, it appears, they just went on blissfully ignoring the fact that Jesus was quite willingly walking the road that would take Him to the Cross.

In the meantime though, on the road to Capernaum, the disciples got into a different argument. And when they arrived, Jesus decided to address something He heard on the road.

Verse 33 They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?"

It would appear that Jesus had been walking up ahead of the disciples and the disciples were lollygagging along behind Him locked in some kind of heated discussion that He kept catching fragments of. And so He asked them 'what were you guys talking about?'

34 But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.

A few years ago there was a book that came out in Christian circles called 'Adventures in missing the point.' That's the disciples. They have entirely missed the point. Here Jesus has gone to the effort of getting them away from the crowd, of personally investing in THEM specifically; He has told them that just like the suffering servant in Isaiah, He is going to suffer and die for their benefit. And yet all they can think of is 'who's the greatest?' This is what the face-palm emoji was invented for.

They just don't get it. And so, Jesus says, 'ok, teachable moment.' Taking the formal posture of a rabbi, verse 35 -

35 Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all."

'If you wanna be great in the God's Kingdom, you better learn to be the servant of all.'

In one sentence, Jesus takes the value system of the world and turns it on its head. If you want to be first, you need to be last. If you want to be the greatest, you've got to be the least. And notice, Jesus doesn't discipline them for wanting to be first; He takes a very natural human instinct, the drive of competition, the desire to be first and says - 'sure, make it your goal to be best, but be the best by being a servant.'

Now why does He say that? Why does He say 'the greatest people are the servants of all'?

He says that because in God's Kingdom, the measure of greatness is not what you can accomplish for yourself; in God's Kingdom the measure of greatness is what you do for others. And Jesus Himself is about to accomplish the most selfless service of all time. He Himself is going to be the servant of all.

He is Himself the MVP of humanity. There is no human who has ever lived that is greater than Jesus. He is GOD in the flesh. He is the fullest representation of being human that we have ever seen, deserving all glory and honour and praise, and yet rather than selfishly clinging to it, He gave it all up. Philippians 2:6 -

6 Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,  
7 but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.  
8 And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross!

Even though Jesus is the greatest, He became the least, to die on a Cross to reconcile us to God, which makes Him the greatest. Philippians 2 continues 'therefore, every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.'<sup>1</sup>

Jesus Himself demonstrates that if you want to be first in God's kingdom, then you need to be the very last and a servant to all.

Now to drive that point home, 36 [Jesus] took a little child and had him stand among them.

They're in a house in Capernaum; some commentators actually think that this might have been Peter's house and that this child is actually one of Peter's kids.<sup>ii</sup> Whatever the case, Jesus takes this child in His arms and says to them -

37 "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me."

In other words, if you act for the benefit of a child, you are actually acting for Jesus' benefit and if you are acting for Jesus' benefit, you are acting for God's benefit. When you serve someone like a child, you are actually honouring God.

Okay, sure, that makes sense I guess. But there's something cultural going on here that heightens the significance of what Jesus is saying. We live in a time when children are super-valued and recognized as important members of a family.

But do you remember a time when 'children were meant to be seen and not heard?' That was the outlook a few generations back; take that back about a thousand generations and you'll get what Jesus is saying.

In this moment, in this culture, Jesus is taking the lowest of the low, the least of the least, the most vulnerable and the least powerful person you could find in society and saying 'Welcome even them. Serve even them.'<sup>iii</sup>

David Garland puts it like this: "The point of comparison is the insignificance of the child on the honor scale. The child had no power, no status and few rights. A child was dependent, vulnerable, entirely subject to the authority of the father; yet Jesus chooses such a one to represent those who are needy and lowly. If one wants to be great, one should shower attention on those who are regarded as insignificant, as Jesus himself has done. Jesus requires his 'great' disciples to show humble service for the humble."<sup>iv</sup>

To capture the force of this illustration for our time, I think I'd put it like this. Back at Christmas time, my parents took our whole family – grandkids and everything – to Toronto to see 'Joseph and the amazing technicolour dream coat.' On the walk to the theatre, in the blistering cold, we kept stepping over people laying under cardboard, on top of sewer grates to try to stay warm.

What Jesus does here with a child is for us like Jesus taking one of those street people in His arms and saying 'if you want to be great in God's kingdom, learn to be the servant of all, servant even to the least powerful and the most vulnerable like this person.'

If you want to be great in God's kingdom, learn to be the servant of all. The greatest people serve the least.

That's why I love that the Sunday school is collecting canned goods to help out at Friendship House. I was over there a couple of weeks ago and saw people struggling to make ends meet. I saw people who had real need. And I think that this is exactly the kind of people that Jesus calls us to serve. If you want to be great in God's kingdom, learn to be the servant of all, even to the least.

This isn't the only place that Jesus makes this point – if you flip over to Matthew 25 – the parable of the sheep and the goats – Matthew 25:37 –

37 "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink?

38 When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you?

39 When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

40 "The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me' (Mat 25:37-40 NIV).

"Whoever welcomes someone like this in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does welcome the one who sent me."

We honour God when we serve the least. The greatest people serve even the least.

So let's think about this in our time and our church. If we want to be great in God's Kingdom, learn to be the servant of all, even 'the least.' There's a sense in which I think we've got this. Joanna Pugsley has done such a good job keeping our eyes on real needs in the community; she's used her experience as a social worker to help us to plug into some ministries that help us to serve 'the lost and the least.' There's a real temptation I think for us to gravitate towards charities that help 'people like us,' but I think we've done a good job of reaching out to be the servants of all.

And broadly speaking, I think that this *is* a church of servant-hearted people. The unspoken motto here seems to be not 'what can I get out of this?' but 'what can I do to help?' I love that. We have so many people who are eager to help; that's a sign that the Holy Spirit is working out passages like this one in our hearts.

Now that being said, living in the culture that we do, I think that it's always important for us to hear this message whenever it comes up. Jesus was the man with the most power, the most influence, the most followers and yet He gave it up to suffer and die and ultimately rise again to conquer death and give us life. When He calls us as Christians, He calls us to become servants too, to look not only to our own interests but also to the interests of others.

Take stock of your own attitudes. What do you think makes a person 'great'? Who are you willing to serve? Are you willing to serve?

If you want to be great in God's Kingdom, learn to be the servant of all, even the least.

### Benediction

16 Work happily together. Don't try to act big. Don't try to get into the good graces of important people, but enjoy the company of ordinary folks. And don't think you know it all!  
Romans 12:16 Living Bible.

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<sup>i</sup> 9 Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:9-11 NIV).

<sup>ii</sup> "The house they were in was in Capernaum and may well have been Simon Peter's, and the child Jesus enfolded may even have been one of Peter's." Kent Hughes, *Mark* (Preaching the Word Commentary) Section: MINISTRY WITH A SERVANT'S ATTITUDE (vv. 35-37). Olivetree digital.

<sup>iii</sup> "...[Jesus] is trying to get his disciples to humble themselves, ride themselves of the usual hubris and power struggles for dominant position, and serve, even serve a child, a humiliating task in the eyes of some ancients" (Ben Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 270).

"This is not children as models of the true disciple (for this, see 10:15) but rather children as exemplars of those with little honor or status in society. Children were not prized but were tolerated, especially in Jewish society (see, e.g., Gen. 30:1; 1 Sam. 2:20; cf. Prov. 17:6). Jesus is saying that the true disciple will accept and minister especially to the weak and unimportant in society. To prove this, Jesus embraces a child (v. 36 [possibly one of Peter's children]), indicating that he considers this child to be important and a member of his family" (Grant Osborne, *Mark* (Teaching the Text Commentary), 165).

<sup>iv</sup> David Garland, *Mark* (NIVAC), 367.