

Pastor Jon's Sermon from Sunday, September 19, 2021

“True Greatness”

Text: Mark 9:30-37

I like to call our Gospel for today the Muhammed Ali text. Ali would always proclaim loudly and boldly to the world in interviews “I am the greatest.”

This is what the disciples were arguing about in Capernaum on the way to Jerusalem where Jesus will ultimately face the cross. Who is the greatest? Little did they know that greatness would be revealed on the cross... in Jesus' sacrifice for the whole world.

In fact, Jesus just predicted his passion a second time and the disciples didn't understand what he was saying and afraid to ask. This talk about suffering, death, and resurrection didn't fit their view of the Messiah, so they avoided the conversation altogether. Can you blame them? We don't like to talk about death and loss.

Greatness to Jesus, on the other hand, won't be found in the things of this world like power, wealth, or in being first. It is when you serve others. And in your serving, Jesus says you will find God in the face of the people you serve... especially in the most vulnerable. Jesus teaches “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”

In one of his final speeches, Martin Luther King Jr. defined greatness as this: “If you want to be important—wonderful. If you want to be recognized—wonderful. If you want to be great—wonderful. But recognize that he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. That's the new definition of greatness. It means that everybody can be great, because everybody can serve.”

Throughout the Gospel, Jesus was demonstrating and teaching about the Kingdom of God that was breaking in. It began when Jesus was born in a manger as a humble baby. This kingdom surprises us by teaching that the most unexpected people are to be honored... In Matthew's beatitudes it is those who mourn, the meek, the poor in Spirit, the persecuted. Jesus Kingdom is where physical and

emotional healing takes place, where people are restored to community and wholeness. Jesus' teaching turned world upside down according to Acts...

So Jesus, knowing fully well what the disciples were arguing about along the way, still asked them what they were arguing about. But they were embarrassed to answer him. What are we embarrassed to share with Jesus? What worldly things do we argue about?

So Jesus took a little child up into his arms. Jesus wasn't just going to tell them how to serve, he was going to demonstrate it. The disciples were probably wondering what is Jesus doing?

You see, in the first century, children were considered some of the most vulnerable, with no status or power... often invisible and even endangered. There was an extremely high mortality rate for children. Until you were able to work and contribute to society, you didn't have much value. Children are much more valued now in America, but keep in mind our Foster Care systems are bursting at the seams in need of Foster parents, immigrant children are crossing our borders in great need, good and affordable child care is hard to come by, and not all kids feel safe at home.

So, for Jesus welcoming a child into his arms... he was demonstrating servant leadership. This was an intimate welcoming. A loving embrace. Jesus made a child who might normally be invisible... visible. Jesus then says, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Debi Thomas in her weekly lectionary essay writes, "On the face of it, this tender gesture is so small and so simple, we easily miss its radicalism. But consider this: Jesus *doesn't* say, "Welcome the child because it's a kind or loving or generous thing to do." He says: Do you want to see what God looks like? Do you want to find God's stand-in, hidden here among you? Are you curious about the truest nature of divine greatness? Then welcome the child. Welcome the child, and *you welcome God.*"

True Greatness for the church and for us as Christians happens when we serve others... especially the least among us. When we turn ourselves outward as a church in service and mission, and not inward at our worshipping numbers and bottom line, we will be great. Those other things will take care of themselves.

Finally, imagine Jesus taking you into his arms. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. Today you are welcome into Jesus outstretched arms. Know that you are loved, forgiven, and honored in Jesus' kingdom. Jesus was a servant to all... including you and me.