

Finding Greatness
Mark 9:30-37
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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There is a Sports Illustrated Kids magazine laying around our house with a cover picturing the New England Patriots quarterback Tom Brady and the question, “Is Tom Brady the G.O.A.T?” For those of you who don’t know, G.O.A.T is an acronym for “greatest of all time.” The article in the magazine is filled with statistics: Tom Brady is the professional quarterback with the most ever regular-season wins, the most ever playoff wins, the most ever championships, and he is in the top four for passing yards, touchdown passes, and more. Whether you are a fan of the Patriots or not, this article makes an argument that you should at least admire Tom Brady’s athletic prowess. And, of course, this premise is built on one certain view of what makes something or someone great.

But today’s reading challenges that view. It asks us to see greatness through a different lens. It asks us to seek greatness by seeking to live from God’s heart.

So, let’s look together at what we heard this morning.

This passage begins with Jesus talking about his upcoming death and resurrection. According to Mark this is the second time he has tried to have this conversation with his disciples. And, as we see, he isn’t too successful. In fact, in verse 32 we read, “But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.”¹ Not only did they not get it, but they did feel secure enough in their relationship to ask, or maybe they knew they were supposed to get it and so they just nodded blankly as he talked, hoping there wouldn’t be a quiz later.

Then as we read on we see affirmation that they really didn’t get it.

¹ Mark 9:32, NRSV.

Verses 33 and 34 read, “Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, ‘What were you arguing about on the way?’ But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.”²

Again, it seems that the disciples understand just enough to know when they are getting it wrong but not quite enough to get it right.

But, before we are too hard on them, I always like to remind us that we have the benefit of knowing the rest of the story when we hear these interactions. We also have the benefit of getting to choose whether or not to call ourselves Christians not only after the entire story was written down, but after 2,000 years of watching people work to live it out. And before we get too critical of the disciples or too cocky about ourselves, we should also remember that too often, even with the benefit of hindsight, we don’t really get it either.

See, the reality is that we live in a time and place where Christianity has been sanitized, where most people aren’t asking us to use it for much more than just our own comfort. We live in a time and place when Christianity has been so deeply embedded with our own national story that we don’t even know how to separate them or how to distinguish the difference even when they are in deep conflict with each other. We live in a time and place where Christianity has been used to support everything from our favorite bigotries to our lifestyle of over-accumulation.

Perhaps we don’t really get it either.

So, what happens if *we* pause and really listen to Jesus? What happens if *we* watch Jesus and then actually work to follow in his footsteps? I suspect the disciples weren’t as dense as we sometimes assume they were. Rather they may have been smart enough to know that following Jesus was hard work, that living in his ways meant they would give something up. Perhaps it

² Mark 9:33-34, NRSV.

wasn't so much that they didn't understand...maybe they understood too much...maybe they knew just what he would ask of them.

After all, “competition for power, wealth, and prestige infected all of the cultures included in the Roman Empire (as it does the cultures of the modern world), and apparently the disciples shared in those values.”³

Perhaps they truly understood what it was that Jesus asked. Because the way of Jesus was a way of less which led to more. Less stuff...less control...less fighting for power...less wealth...less fame...less prestige – which led to – more freedom...more joy...more compassion...more equality...more love.

But in the world view in which they lived, which in some ways is starkly distinct from ours and in other ways is just not that different...in that world view, the ideas of choosing less, of choosing servanthood, of choosing to defer the spotlight to another, of choosing to share power, of choosing to listen to the enemy...those ideas were not the ones that were celebrated.

Perhaps that sounds familiar.

See, if we are honest, we have to admit that our world is not so different. We, too, like to claim our faith and keep our comfortable homes with too many square feet. We, too, like to say we are followers of Jesus while only invoking Jesus when he serves our purposes. We, too, like to create God in our own image with our own preferences and even our own bigotries rather than following the God who existed before we were even thought of.

The priorities of this world come in conflict with the priorities of Jesus far more often than we like to admit. The reality is that it is easier to sit in pews in a sanctuary and talk about Jesus dying for us than it is to commit to living our lives for him.

³ *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4*, pg. 95.

Most of us will never come face to face with having to answer the question, “Would you die for your faith?” Most of us will never have someone put a gun to our head and ask us to denounce our faith. Most of us will never have our faith be something that causes us to fear for our lives or livelihood. And, in many ways we are fortunate because of that.

There are people of faith all around the world, across time and space, who have known what it was to choose to not only claim but to live their faith even when it was a risk to them. People who have lost homes and lives, been cut off from families and lost jobs because they remained committed. But most of will never know that.

And as much as we rejoice in that, the reality is that as we have rested comfortably because for us choosing faith is not a great risk, we have also too often convinced ourselves that our faith should be easy. And so, we have lost the reality that our faith does ask something of us – in fact, it asks much of us.

While my life may not be at risk because I say I am a Christian, my heart and soul are at risk each time that I choose myself over the other...each time that I decide that growing my wealth is more important than my neighbor having a meal...each time that I decide that if I find someone repulsive or name someone as an enemy then God must feel the same. Whenever we make these choices we are risking our very core.

Jesus was talking about the end of his life which was coming soon. A life that would end because too often he challenged the powers that be, he held accountable the national and religious systems that were supporting a rich-get-richer-while-the-poor-get-poorer society and that were drawing lines that cut people out. And meanwhile, his closest friends and followers could do nothing but fight about who was the greatest.

It was into this reality that Jesus drew a child. Beginning with verse 35 we hear, “He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, ‘Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.’ 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.’”⁴

And, if we look at the original language, we will see that the word here for child has the same root as the word for servant. In other words, Jesus wasn’t only drawing a sweet, gurgling baby into their midst because of its cuteness or innocence. Rather, Jesus drew in a child, a servant, one without power, one without greatness, one without much value in their day.

“You are looking for greatness in all the wrong places,” he said. Greatness doesn’t come when you are served, but it comes when you serve and when you care. It comes when you place yourself in a lower position in order that someone else who has been held there can be set free. It comes when you share what you have – wealth, power, prestige, simply a cup of cold water.

You can find greatness. But don’t look for it as the world looks...look to the child, the servant, the oppressed, the survivor. And Jesus invites us to not only look there but to choose to go there, to choose servanthood, to choose to lift others up even when it means sacrifice on our part.

You can find greatness. It may be different than you expect. But you can find it. All you need to do is follow the way of Jesus.

Amen.

⁴ Mark 9:35-37, NRSV.