

## “A Different Understanding of Greatness”

Mark 9:30-37

Richard C. Allen

September 20, 2009

South Glastonbury

Connecticut

Jesus is famous for upsetting the proverbial applecart. He takes long-accepted wisdom and turns it upside down. In the Sermon on the Mount, he draws our attention to the age old wisdom of hating one's enemies and then flips that upside down by insisting we find ways to love our antagonists, even to pray for them. In that same sermon, he draws our attention to the age old wisdom of revenge, an eye for an eye; but then he challenges us to explore a much more excellent way, the way of forgiveness and reconciliation.

In the text for today from Mark's Gospel, we find him teaching in that same style. The disciples have been arguing amongst themselves over which of them is the greatest. Clearly, they are assuming an age old definition of greatness: having power, wielding authority, calling the shots. Once again, Jesus upsets the applecart. He invites the disciples to think about greatness in a whole new way, by taking on the attitude of the servant, by approaching life as ones who have come to serve rather than as ones who have come to be served.

Being a servant leader does not imply living in poverty. Being a servant leader is not a matter of economic standing. It is a matter of theological orientation. It is a matter of perceiving opportunities to love and then taking the initiative to love without regard for being loved in return. This is the more excellent standard of greatness Jesus lifted up. A pauper can be a servant leader and a millionaire can be a servant leader. In the Realm of God, the one who is known for greatness is the one who notices where love is needed and then acts boldly to fill that void, never calculating how one day that love might be returned.

I must admit I do resist having my applecart upset. Growing up, it was real clear to me who the great people were. They included Charlie Connelly and Y.A. Tittle, quarterbacks for the New York Giants who could throw touchdown passes to Kyle Rote nearly at will. The great ones were Cousery and Russell and Sharman and Luskatoff, Boston Celtics who could pass, dribble and shoot their way into national championships year after year. They were Laver and Rosewall and Gonzales and Moffatt, tennis players who knocked the cover off the ball when they served their big serve. I grew up in a culture that measured greatness in these kinds of achievements. And I must admit I still get goose bumps when I hear Jeter is closing in on Goerig's record of career hits. I am a product of my culture.

But I am also a product of my faith tradition, a tradition that defines greatness with a whole different vocabulary. I have been immersed in that culture we know as the Realm of God, a culture where greatness and servanthood are synonyms; not antonyms. This teaching culminates in John's rendition of the Last Supper. Jesus and the twelve are seated at a table in the upper room waiting to observe the Passover meal. They remain seated, waiting for the servant to appear with the warm water for bathing their hot, dusty feet; waiting for the servant to come with the towel to do that work of caring for the comfort of the guests. They wait and they wait. The servant seems to be delayed. Then, Jesus rises from the table, takes a basin of water and a clean towel and proceeds to wash all twenty four of the disciples' feet. Drying off the last toe, he says to them in that intimate voice of his, "I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you."

I didn't understand the power of that teaching until I attended a UCC summer camp called Placerville Camp in the Black Hills in Western South Dakota. In that setting, with high school students, we sat in a circle and the dean of the camp, the Rev. Dr. Jack Brooks, showed up with a basin of water and a towel.

He washed our feet. He took his time, bathing each ankle, each foot, each toe; drying each foot with gentleness and kindness and humility. I think it was the first time the influence of faith trumped the influence of culture. In that foot washing circle, I just got it...the blessedness of servanthood, the greatness that comes with seeing who needs to be comforted and then moving to comfort that one.

At the picnic last Sunday, I had a brief encounter with Linda, the daughter of Bob and Marie Calvin. She reminded me that she now lives down in the Bible Belt where church families really look out for each other. Then she said she was simply overwhelmed by the servant ministry that South Church members have been offering to her parents this summer. Following her mother's surgery, many of this community of faith just moved right in with food and transportation and massage and prayer and house cleaning and you name it. Linda was astounded. She said she witnessed first-hand the kind of greatness Jesus had in mind that day when he upset the apple cart in the midst of the disciples when he said, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

Our culture is not big on the concept of servanthood. We don't find too many colleges offering a course in Servanthood 101. High schools and private schools and charter schools don't fill their resource rooms with basins of warm water and towels for learning how to be a washer of feet. The greatness related to servanthood is a spiritual value. It is for the churches to teach and to model. If families aren't exposed to this applecart upsetting mentality at church, then where else will they grasp it?

Whether you are a trustee or a deacon, an usher or a lay reader, a prayer shall knitter or a visitor, a mission board member or active on social action, a church school teacher or a mission advisor, a Confirmation sponsor or an office volunteer, a choir member or an instrumentalist;

the challenge always is to be about our various ministries as servant leaders, as women and men who perceive where love is needed and then act boldly to see that love is delivered. It's a stark contrast to what the culture would have us believe really matters. It's what Jesus lifts up as the one thing worth striving for...to be known in the gates as one who came to be a servant of all. In the greatest of hope, Amen.