

“A Reflection on Greatness”

Mark 9:30-37

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You have to love the twelve disciples. They are so bloomin’ human. There they are, walking along the road, wondering which of them will be known as ‘the greatest’. Jesus has eave-dropped on this conversation, and he’s a little irritated with them. He sees it is time for a little teaching moment. He sees he needs to correct their thinking when it comes to understanding greatness. He wants them to understand greatness from a faith perspective.

Once again, Jesus upsets the proverbial applecart. If you want to be first, place yourself at the end of the line. The greatest of all is the servant of all. We can imagine the disciples hearing this paradox and feeling the wind leaking out of their sails. “Oh! Really? Servant of all? Hmmm.” A moment of grave consternation settles upon them like a dense fog over Pond Pasture.

As the twelve are wrapping their minds around this concept of linking greatness with servanthood, Jesus holds up a child to further illustrate his truth. To welcome a child was to welcome someone who had no voice, no authority, no accumulated wealth, no power, no political clout, no social standing. In those days, to welcome a child was to gain no particular advantage. Only a servant would welcome a child!

Those seeking greatness would more likely have welcomed the local mayor or the local banker or the local college president or the local priest or the local talk show host. This would have been understood as the normal path toward greatness, associating with the power-people in the community.

I can understand the disciples' confusion. I had a similar experience two years ago at the Open Hearth Overcomers Breakfast at the Hartford Club. Being the clergy person offering the invocation, I got to sit at the head table which included Bobby Valentine, who at that time was being considered by the Boston Red Sox to be their manager; Pedro Segarra, who at that time was riding a wave of popularity as Hartford's new mayor, and other dignitaries, too numerous to mention. I felt like I was surely on the road to greatness, rubbing shoulders with these giants. But when each of those dignitaries spoke, each one related a personal story of failure and struggle, and how their own strength of character, their own faith, had been a product of choosing a servant's identity.

I tell you I felt like those first disciples must have felt, having the rug of greatness pulled out from under me. I left that breakfast knowing I had been among some great people whose greatness had everything to do with claiming an attitude of servanthood. It was a humbling breakfast I won't forget.

Jesus hoisted a toddler up high for all to see, saying, "The one who welcomes one such child, welcomes me." I take this to mean that the church who welcomes the one who has no power base, no strings to pull, no leverage to invoke is the church that welcomes Jesus, himself. This is the church where Jesus feels most welcome.

As you know, Jesus took a lot of grief by insisting on hanging out with people of low estate: women who had no education, men who had no employment, women and men who suffered with mental illness, lepers who had no seat at the table, Samaritans who were looked upon with suspicion. He took a lot of guff hanging out with the likes of these. Mark, the author of our Gospel text for today, is lifting this up as a model for local churches: to welcome, indeed, to invite and to befriend those who seem to have no power, or those whose power is revealed only in their servanthood.

In some mysterious way, Christ is present in the one who dons an apron and washes the dishes, in the one who picks up a broom and sweeps the floor, in the one who opens the can of polish and shines the shoes, in the one who offers a ride, in the one who holds the door open for another.

In my life, I have known a number of **great** people. One of these was Joan Stevens. About this time of year, she would come marching into the church office announcing it was time to get organized for the Gift of Giving Tree. And she would have in-hand names of homeless men, names of women down on their luck, names of children with special needs, names of youth who just needed a little break. And she would clutch these names as if she were holding the crown jewels of England. She would commence to make Christmas tree ornaments for each one of these names as if each one were the president of a prestigious university. And she wouldn't leave the office until she had gathered the support she had come to find. Somehow, Joan saw in each of these Gift of Giving Tree names the very presence of Christ himself. I am so glad that others are picking up this torch and running with it because it provides a window onto the true meaning of greatness.

In my life, I have known a number of great people. One of these is a local resident named Rick, a master cabinet maker who has actually worked on the restoration of Thomas Jefferson's home in Virginia. About 15 years ago, there was a South Church single mom with three young children and very little income. As Christmas approached, I suggested to Rick that we could use his pickup truck to go find a Christmas tree and deliver it to that home. When we arrived at the house, Rick noticed that the front steps were broken down and badly in need of repair. I could see the wheels turning in his head. I could feel the warmth generating in his heart. Awakened within him was a compassion for a family that had no visible sign of power of any kind.

He returned the next day with his nail apron tied at his waist, with his tools and some lumber, and he fixed those steps like new. On that occasion, Rick did a great thing. He was a great human being; he was the image of Christ for me. He chose to be the servant when there was clearly nothing to be gained for himself. This family would never be able to repay the favor; never be able to introduce him to persons of influence, never be able to advance his career. This is what Mark had in mind when he included the language about Jesus holding up the child in the midst of the disciples, saying, "When you welcome one such child, you welcome me."

When Jesus had completed this little teaching moment, each of the twelve had to re-assess whether or not to continue following this Jesus of Nazareth. Be a servant in the service of the human family? Me? Evidently, what Jesus had said rang true to them. They knew it was so. Greatness lies in humility. Greatness lies in welcoming the one who can never repay the favor. Greatness lies in seeing Christ in the one in whom others see only darkness.

That is the legacy that comes down to us in 2012. It is our spiritual inheritance. That is how I have heard the text speaking to me this week. I remain in the greatest of hope. Amen.