

## Who is the Greatest?

James 3:13-18, 4:7-8; Mark 9:30-37

September 19, 2021

Who has had the greatest influence in your life? What made them great? Just a little something to think about. We'll come back to that question shortly. You may remember that Jesus had been way north—up around Tyre and Sidon—Gentile country. It was the furthest north that Jesus had ever been, or would ever be. Things were about to change – drastically. He turned south to pass through Galilee—his homeland, and then things turned south.

But Jesus wasn't going home for a well-deserved rest. Our Gospel lesson tells us that he was just passing through Galilee. He was on his way to Jerusalem—on his way to the cross. They would kill him in Jerusalem. He knew that. So Jesus started his journey to Jerusalem. The time had come for him to do what he had to do. Soon the whole world would know.

As Jesus passed through Galilee, most people would have stopped to visit their family – to eat a home-cooked meal. But Jesus and his disciples didn't do that. Our text says that Jesus didn't want anyone to know that they were in Galilee—because:

"He was teaching his disciples, saying to them,  
"The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands,  
and they will kill him,  
and three days after being killed,  
he will rise again" (9:31).

In the previous chapter, Jesus revealed to the disciples for the first time that he would suffer and die. Peter rebuked Jesus for saying such a thing, but Jesus quickly put Peter in his place. This time when Jesus spoke about what lay ahead, the disciples did not say a word. They did not want to incur the wrath of Jesus as Peter had. Mark tells us, "The disciples did not understand what Jesus was saying—and were afraid to ask him" (9:32). Isn't that just like men – afraid to stop and ask questions?

On two occasions now, Jesus told the disciples that he was going to suffer and die. Not only did they fail to respond to him, but they apparently forgot what he said. Instead of taking the words about his suffering and crucifixion to heart, on the way to Capernaum the disciples had been arguing about who among them was the greatest. They were miles apart spiritually and on a completely different wavelength.

Are you surprised after all of this time that the disciples didn't "get it?" Sometimes the disciples only hear what they want to hear. Sometimes *we* only hear what we want to hear. The disciples didn't expect Jesus to die anytime soon, so when he said that he was

going to suffer and die, they let his words go in one ear and out the other. They were afraid. They were in denial. Who would lead and guide them? What would become of them? The poet T.S. Eliot spoke the truth when he said, "Humankind cannot bear too much reality," and they could not. The disciples could not bear the burden that Christ was about to die and leave them on their own.

What did Jesus think of all of this? Were they great in the eyes of God? You know the answer to that one. I don't know if God laughed or cried. This was no time for the disciples to talk about greatness unless they defined it in a very different way. What would it mean to be "great" in the eyes of God? There were lessons to be learned.

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Let's go back for a moment to the question Jesus asked the disciples. "What were you arguing about?" he asked them. (v. 33). He knew. Don't think for a moment that he didn't know what they were arguing about. Perhaps they were ashamed . . . embarrassed. But Jesus used it as a teaching moment. He taught them how to be great in the eyes of God. He didn't tell them to go to the local rabbinical school and take some courses. He didn't tell them how to get a good job so they could advance their career. He didn't tell them how to be great preachers and influence public opinion.

Instead, Jesus told the disciples how to be truly great and spiritually significant in ways that matter. As often was the case with Jesus, he does the unexpected, and he uses a concrete example from everyday life. Jesus took a small child in his arms. That was amazing in itself. Children were not encouraged to be around adults in that day. Can you imagine that? Jesus said, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me" (v. 37). It was the first children's story! He used an example of a child because children needed help—they needed someone to provide food, clothing, and shelter, but they also needed love—and they needed help learning how to live. Jesus was saying you should serve such ones as these. This is the way to find favor in the eyes of God. That's all that matters. Let go of your ego and ambitions. "Whoever *loses* their life for my sake and the gospel will save it," he says. "Stop seeing the world through your eyes and start seeing it through mine." That is how Jesus defines greatness, which is at odds with the world.

So who is great in *your* eyes and why? Would it be some celebrity? A professional athlete? Someone we all know? Someone with money or a successful career? Who do you think would be great in God's book? How about in your own life? Here's a little quiz to stimulate your thoughts:

List a few teachers who aided your journey through school.

Name three friends who have helped you through a difficult time.

Think of a few people who have made you feel appreciated and special.

Name a couple people who made you laugh this week.

Think of five people with whom you enjoy spending time.

Think of several people here at church with whom you really connect.

Think about all the volunteers here at church who make sure things get done.

Have you ever wondered why they do what they do? You should ask them some time. None of these people would likely consider themselves great, but that is because true greatness also has a healthy dose of humility, which is another gift of the Spirit.

I have been blessed with many people who greatly shaped my life. There were elementary school teachers whom I remember to this day. There were Sunday School teachers I adored. There was the Church League basketball coach who put me in the game, even though I was not a very good player. There were several pastors along the way who saw more in me than I saw in myself, and above all, there was a saintly grandmother who raised me while my parents were working six days a week in the family bakery.

One thing that makes people great is that they care about you, and maybe that's what God cares about the most. God does not see what the world sees, and being significant in the eyes of God is the only one whose opinion really matters. I would like to end with a story about a monk who learned this valuable lesson.

An old monk prayed many years for a vision from God to strengthen his faith, but it never came. He had almost given up hope when one day an angelic visitor appeared before him. The old monk was overjoyed. But then right in the middle of the vision, the monastery bell rang. The ringing of the bell meant it was time to feed the poor who gathered daily at the monastery gate. It was the old monk's turn to feed them. If he failed to show up with food, the unfortunate people would leave quietly, thinking the monastery had nothing to give to them to eat that day.

The old monk was torn between his earthy duty and his heavenly vision, but before the bell stopped ringing, the monk made his decision. With a heavy heart, he turned his back on the angelic visitor and went off to feed the poor. Nearly an hour later, the old monk returned to his room. When he opened the door, he could hardly believe his eyes. There in the room was the same angelic figure waiting for him. As the monk dropped to his knees in thanksgiving, the angel said to him, "My son, had you not gone off to feed the poor, I would not have stayed. But because you cared for the least of these, all heaven and earth shall be yours."

That story bears a striking resemblance to today's gospel reading. After the monk had done all these things, he learned the most important spiritual lesson of his life. The best way to serve God is to reach out in service to our brothers and sisters, especially those less fortunate than ourselves. Jesus taught his disciples this lesson, saying, "Whoever wants to be first must place himself or herself last of all and be the servant of all." Think Mother Teresa. Think Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King Jr. That is how Jesus defined greatness, which is all that really matters in the end. Let us turn from successes we can never keep in order to gain a life we can never lose. Amen

James 3:13 -18, 4:7-8

3:13 Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.

3:14 But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth.

3:15 Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish.

3:16 For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind.

3:17 But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.

3:18 And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

4:7 Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the Evil One, and he will flee from you.

4:8 Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

Mark 9:30-37

9:30 They went on from there and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know it;

9:31 for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again."

9:32 But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

9:33 Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?"

9:34 But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.

9:35 He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

9:36 Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them,

9:37 "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."