



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Greatness Redefined

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

September 20, 2009

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)

Mark 9:30-37

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They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; 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." But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

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. 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."

There's an anonymous reflection about Jesus that has been floating around for a couple of decades that deals with Jesus as a teacher. I suspect most—if not all—of you have heard it before (especially the teachers among us). It's worth hearing again because it captures how difficult it must have been for Jesus to teach the disciples—especially as they are pictured in Mark's Gospel.

Then Jesus took his disciples up the mountain and gathering them around him, he taught them saying:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are the meek.

Blessed are they that mourn.

Blessed are the merciful.

Blessed are they who thirst for justice.

Blessed are you when persecuted.

*Blessed are you when you suffer.
 Be glad and rejoice for your reward is great in heaven...."
 Then Simon Peter said, "Do we have to write this down?"
 and Andrew said, "Are we supposed to know this?"
 and James said, "Will we have a test on it?"
 and Phillip said, "What if we don't know it?"
 and Bartholomew said, "Do we have to turn this in?"
 and John said, "The other disciples didn't have to learn this.
 and Matthew said, "When do we get out of here?"
 Then one of the Pharisees present asked Jesus to articulate his
 terminal objectives in the cognitive domain...
 And Jesus wept...*

While that fictitious story uses the beatitudes as its backdrop, it's also true that several other stories could have worked just as well, including the story we read today.

Our text today contains a difficult story about discipleship and greatness, and it comes just as Jesus is talking with his disciples about how being the Christ means that he is going to suffer and die. They didn't understand him the first time he told them that, and they didn't get it now either.

Whenever I hear this story and others like it, I always think back to my junior high Sunday School class in the church in Dallas where our family belonged. It had to be the worst collection of students around. I've talked about that class a few times over the years, so you may remember them. No names have been changed because there weren't any innocent ones to protect.

There were about eight of us in the class, and whenever we got together, there was typically some sort of trouble. Nothing too drastic, of course, but enough to drive a teacher from the room. All through the lesson we would talk, and whisper, and giggle, and argue, and draw. One day, the teacher decided that he'd had enough, so he got up, walked out of the room, and shortly thereafter moved from Dallas to far West Texas. I'm not sure we had anything to do with his moving, but we definitely made him throw up his hands in disgust and leave us for greener pastures. He was a good teacher. He simply got tired of messing with the terrible students around him.

I wonder if Jesus ever felt the same way. Whenever I read the stories of Jesus and his disciples, I can't help but wonder if Jesus were ever tempted to get rid of his disciples and start over. Time after time, Jesus reveals some great truth of the gospel—some life-giving revelation about who he is—but the disciples don't understand or even listen. Jesus had to have been frustrated at times.

Take this morning's text for example. Jesus is walking with his disciples. They're walking through Galilee, Mark tells us. But Mark is really up to something far deeper than that. He's trying to let us know that they're not just walking, but that they're walking toward Jerusalem. They're on the way. When Mark says that they were "on the way," he's really saying that Jesus is "on the way" to the Cross. In order to understand anything Je-

Jesus says about discipleship in Mark's Gospel, then, we must listen in the shadows of the Cross.

As they were walking, Jesus talked alone with his disciples, and he began to teach them what he was about to suffer. It was a painful statement for Jesus. He was sharing with his closest friends that he was about to be killed. But as Mark writes it, "The disciples didn't understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him."

You've been there, haven't you? Do you remember a time when someone close to you shared something so overwhelming that you didn't know what to say or do? You were paralyzed by what was said, and you didn't even know what questions to ask. That's the way the disciples were. They simply didn't understand.

Of course, even if Mark hadn't told us that they didn't get it, we would have figured that out on our own. The next part of the story shows just how little they understood about what it means to follow in the way of Jesus.

When they finally came to Capernaum and entered the house where they would be staying, Jesus asked them an interesting question: "Oh, by the way," he says to them. "I saw you arguing with one another along the way. What was it you were arguing about?"

The disciples say nothing.

"I say," Jesus finally asks again. "What were you talking about along the way?"

Mark tells us the disciples were silent because they had been arguing with one another who was the greatest. More than anything else, their argument shows that truly they didn't understand what Jesus had been talking about on the way. They simply couldn't fathom a messiah who would suffer and die. It didn't fit into their picture of being great.

"What does it mean to be great?" Ask that of anyone out on the street, and you probably would get some familiar answers. Being great means being the best at something. It means that we could get anything we want. It means that you would have more power than you could ever use. It means you'd get a big paycheck. Being great means that you'd have so many servants taking care of you that you wouldn't even have to lift a finger.

Do you see why the disciples might argue about who would be greatest in their life together? In its most basic sense, to be the greatest is to be the one who is served.

It's important to remember that Jesus is talking to his disciples alone here, which in Mark's Gospel is another way of saying that he's speaking to the church. Even the church isn't exempt from arguing about greatness. In fact, if you boil it down, most church disagreements aren't over things as much as they are over people. Sometimes we disagree over who's the greatest, forgetting that it is always Jesus in the church.

So Jesus turns the disciples' thoughts upside down as he begins to instruct them about greatness in the kingdom of God. You see, you and I and others like us are tempted to look at greatness through the eyes of the world, where the powerful get anything they want and everybody is serving them. But Jesus says it's not like that in the kingdom: "If you want to be first, then be last of all and servant of all."

And Jesus takes a child in his arms and says to the disciples, "If you are to be truly great, then you will care for this child who is powerless. He can do nothing to repay you; you alone can serve him."

With a vivid example, Jesus shows what true greatness is about in the way of the kingdom: it is about serving the needs of other people. There is no way to make it anything less than the total re-orientation of what it means to be great.

“If you want to be first, then be last of all and servant of all.” At first glance, that doesn’t look particularly wise. But when we take a deeper look, you begin to see that greatness not just talked about—but embodied in Jesus. In him, we see one who is truly great even as he serves the lowest of the low, even as he stoops to wash his disciples’ feet. And it’s as we see the greatness of that life that we understand our own calling as the people of God to be servant of all.