

Who is Great?

Michael J. Nielsen / General

Jesus teaches on greatness; A Child; Servant of the Lord / Mark 9:30–37

That the hearers would receive the gracious news that they have a Great Servant!

- › Grace, mercy, and peace be yours from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Who is great? It's a question that has been discussed since time began really. We see it yet again in our text this morning. Greatness. Each individual has his or her own definition of what greatness looks like. It looks different in nuances for everybody, but in today's Gospel, we see both sides of the debate of the question, "Who is great?" There's the disciple's debate where they are arguing amongst themselves and the definition that Jesus gives to his disciples privately.

The disciples ideas - which are also ours!

There's no way around it, we have our own ideas about who is the greatest! And so do the disciples! The opening words of our text should have settled it with the disciples and frankly should motion us towards a short sermon this morning. Jesus had just cast out the demon who possessed the young lad since childhood and now as Jesus and his disciples are walking and talking he tells them for the second time what is going to happen. He's going to be delivered into the hands of men and he will be killed, and then he will rise on the third day. Point taken, Jesus is the greatest, He is the servant of all. Amen.

Oh but wait! As they walking and talking, the disciples were discussing something on the way. Jesus knows but he wants the disciples to fess up. They were arguing about who is great? Obviously they didn't get it! They didn't get what Jesus had just told them.

Jesus catches them in their own fleshy pride! Jesus catches them in their own unique desires to be great! That is in their own definition of greatness and firstness! Now many of us may not seek our own accolades. We may not be seeking front page news! We may not be seeking public celebration. Yet, in our own unique ways, we are looking out for number one!

When my family and I are down in St. Louis, and I'm driving on the interstates and roads around the city, I see a phenomena that we all encounter...the desire to be first in line. The desire to get to our destination the quickest. I see drivers cut off others just to be in front. It doesn't

just happen on the highways and byways...it happens in our earliest of days when we'd complain to our teacher from the lunch line... "Jimmy butted in line." It happens in the checkout line when we try to get to the checkout with a cart full of groceries before the person with 3 items gets there. We look out for ourselves. We desire to be great in our own proudly way!

And what do we do when we don't get our way! When our way is not picked! We make it known...maybe not publically, maybe it's in private to one or two others as we trash the person that prevented us from getting our way! We are looking out only for ourselves. We are seeking only to serve the self! We are seeking to get ahead. We are seeking to be great and we will do anything...even if others call us "humble."

We argue just as the disciples do about who is great. And as that is said, "we realize that the human heart has not changed over the centuries and greatness is till often measured in ways that turn people against one another, even in the church. Jesus Christ reveals in this text that the search for greatness hidden in the human heart will separated from one another. Oh how often this happens in our lives! Our desire for our greatness separates husband and wife, parent and child. Our desire for greatness separates siblings as they jockey for position in the family. Our desire for greatness even separates the church - whether it's the separation of pastor and people or even people in the pews that come to blows. Seeking out greatness, that hidden desire in our hearts...separates!

The disciples know this...there is ranks forming in their group...three of them were just not on the Mt. of Transfiguration. The other nine were frustrated since they couldn't cast out the demon. Who is great? It's a question that for them seems to be worth arguing about! And we do to, whether it's be words...or by our actions and thoughts!

An example of greatness

So Jesus provides them an example of greatness - a statement of fact and then an object lesson. He tells the disciples who are jockeying for position in the group, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." Jesus tells them to be great...you must be a servant!

And then Jesus takes a little child, places him in the midst of the 12 and Jesus then picks him and says, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me, but him who sent me." This is the first of three texts in a row where Jesus uses a child as an object lesson. Jesus takes an individual, where societally and all notions we could all agree in some instance...is the least! Think about it this way in our culture...before a child turns 18, they really have no rights in and of themselves. They are last in society! And Jesus shockingly takes a child...and says, "In order to be great...you need to receive a child in my name." This is just an object lesson. He's telling that in order to be great, you must serve...serve your neighbor...that is what God has given you to do! Whether it be child or adult...you must serve in order to be great! It's what the life of a disciple is all about.

As I think about a child being, being placed into greatness, in some of my bible reading I came across the story of a king. King Joash reigned for forty years in Jerusalem...and II Chronicles 24 tells us that he was only 7 years old. A young child, was chosen for the throne and God made him great!

We look at the example of Jesus and perhaps even King Joash and it leaves no room for our fleshy pride and desire to be great. Joash didn't do anything to become great, in fact he was threatened as an infant...but yet God spared him. To be great, dear people of God is to serve in humility.

True Greatness!

Who is Great! The one who is humble. The one who serves in humility. Jesus in our text told us who was great - actually the greatest. Jesus is great? Jesus is the greatest! This is revealed in his miracles and in the way he is taught and revealed to be the Son of God. This was revealed to Peter, James, and John on the Mount of Transfiguration. Jesus is truly the greatest! And He reveals for the second time his greatness!

Jesus will be handed over to the hands of sinful men. He will be physically beaten and abused by the hands of sinful men. He will submit to the schemes of evil men. He will go to the cross in humility and he will be killed! He will suffer the ultimate physical punishment, tortured in a slow and painful death. As you gaze to the cross you see Jesus...the last of all. The curse is on him!

But Jesus suffers in humility for you to serve you...to be Servant of All. He doesn't just do it to serve...but in his service to you, he saves. His life as servant he sacrifices as a ransom to buy you back. He redeems you and he forgives your sins...your sins of fleshy pride and the desire to be the greatest. He forgives your sins of abusing others to get ahead, whether it's verbally, emotionally, and sometimes even physically. He forgives everything as he appears to be last of all on the cross.

Yet, his work isn't done...God the Father exalts His Son. He raises Jesus from the dead on the third day! The Crucified Son of Man who was protected as an infant, now on the third day rises from the dead and takes his rightful place as the everlasting Servant King!

True Greatness bestowed on you

As your Servant King, the one who frees you from your sinful, fleshy pride of self-service, frees you to serve. You are great, not because of who you are, but because of whose you are, YOU are Christ's, you were joined to him in his humiliation at the cross and his exaltation on the third day at your baptism. You dear people, live in the Kingdom of God. And before his throne you are free! Before his throne dear people you are great! Before his throne you receive great gifts of salvation, forgiveness and life eternal.

And he bids you to crucify the flesh daily, to daily live in humble service to one another. Dear people of God, Jesus frees you to serve your neighbor. Jesus frees you to be great! Jesus frees you to become last of all and servant of all.

Martin Luther in his writings, writes something like this: Changing the diaper of a little baby is a great service. You are serving that little child, you are humbling yourself to get your hands dirty, maybe even have your gag reflex start up. You are serving your son or daughter out of your God-given duty as a parent. You are taking that child in your hands and you become great!

It's any of your mundane tasks of service to your neighbor...it happens as you dig your beets or combine your wheat and soybeans! You are serving your neighbor! I just pray that it is in humble service.

You serve your neighbor as you help a friend with their homework or sit by the kid who is alone in the lunch room. You serve your neighbor by lifting up your neighbor in prayer, whether you think they need pray or not. In whatever God-given vocations, in which you serve your neighbor, do it well...and when you serve them, or rather receive them, you receive not only Jesus, but the Father as well.

And as you serve, Jesus exalts you...the humble servant. And as you serve your fellow man, you reflect the glory of the Son of man, the Son of God. And in Jesus Christ...you are great! You are great because you are joined to him!

And we can pray together:

Make me a servant
Humble and meek
Lord let me lift up those who are weak
And may the prayers of my heart always be
Make me a servant
Make me a servant
Make me a servant today.

And He has...he has in your greatness. Who is Great? Jesus, yes, for he is the last of all and servant of all...and you! You are great, now you may not be great in the eyes of man, but in the eyes of God, you are great as you serve in humble faithfulness to your fellow man!

In Jesus Name. Amen.

- › Now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding, guard your hearts and your minds and keep them focused in Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior. Amen.