

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a ~ Mark 9:30-37

*What Does Greatness Look Like?*

18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost ~ Sacrament of Baptism ~ September 22, 2024

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*Introduction to Scripture:*

We are about to hear the second time Jesus predicts his passion in the Gospel called Mark. The first time was last Sunday's lesson, in Mark 8. Remember that? I will remind you: Jesus started by taking a poll with his disciples on what people were saying about him, then asked them who *they* thought he was. Peter gets the right answer, "You are the Messiah," but then strongly rejects Jesus' passion prediction, which Jesus turned into a teaching opportunity on discipleship: "If any want to become *my* followers, let them deny themselves, and take up their cross, and follow me." Lesson learned, got it! Right? (Mark 8:34)

I have a hunch; we have plenty of teachers and retired teachers in this room right now. Please raise your hand if you are, or ever were, a teacher. *Thanks.* You all who just raised your hand know this: when you are teaching a new lesson, and especially a hard one: almost no one gets it on the first go. You have to repeat, review, remind, practice, go at it from one angle and then another. That's what we have here in today's lesson. Jesus' repeats his passion prediction, and tells them in another way, the same message about discipleship. What they must do, if they truly want to reflect and refract Jesus' life-changing, world-saving, love. And it had to do with a child.

Jesus knew his core students, (aka the twelve disciples) definitely didn't get it the first time. And so, Messiah, Healer, Miracle maker, Jesus puts on his teaching hat again. He starts his 2<sup>nd</sup> time with this teaching as they were on the move through Galilee. But then at Capernaum he takes it up a notch. You teachers know what I'm talking about. When you are *really* getting down to business. "Phones down, eyes on me, watch what I am saying and what I am doing." That voice. The signal for us in this scripture lesson is a phrase that is easy to miss, "He sat down.". Especially for us, 2,000 years later, when typically we preachers and teachers "stand and deliver" to preach and teach. Especially when we are saying something important or difficult to understand. But in Jesus' time, sitting down was the position for serious teaching. Rabbis sat down to teach the Torah. Sitting down was the body posture that said, "Listen up. I am about to teach you something very important... And yes: this *will* be on the test.

On his second go, Rabbi Teacher Jesus added a visual. Perhaps he sensed they needed something they could see to get this one in the hard drive. So, he takes a child who happens to be nearby, to get his point across. He made a similar move at the Last Supper, when he got down on his knees, took a towel and basin and washed his disciples' feet. In today's story, and at the Last Supper, Jesus employs a visual for his disciples to see Divine Love in action. Even in his final hour with his disciples, he's *still* bringing home the same lesson: it's about humble service. One child at a time. One toe at a time. How could greatness possibly look like that? Let us open our minds and hearts to what Jesus has to teach us today, in this reading of God's Holy Word as it is written in Mark 9:30-37.

*Sermon:*

Who is the greatest Green Bay Packer of all time? Vince Lombardi, Bart Starr, Brett Favre, ... Aaron Rodgers? We can hope that Jordan Love may someday join this group. Maybe for today, we are just hoping that Coach LeFleur puts him in, if he's ready. And be grateful for the great job that Malik Willis did last Sunday against the Colts. And what about the greatest Milwaukee Brewer of all time? Robin Yount (251 homers, 1,406 RBIs, 271 stolen bases), Ryan Braun. Not to leave out, MVP, soul of the team, Christian Yelich. Different sport, different statistics, of course. And I'm sure you sports fans out there may argue amongst yourselves about who is the greatest, the GOAT, (Greatest Of All Time) in football and baseball.

The disciples were arguing about who is the greatest disciple. Consider for a moment: so what *does* a grand slam disciple move look like; or a touchdown in God's kingdom, better yet, a game saving interception caught in the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter for Jesus, look like? Of course, the disciples were asking the wrong question. It seems they desperately wanted to change the subject from the dreaded subject that Jesus had raised again: the Son of Man was going to be betrayed and killed and rise again. Oh no, not that again...What does he mean, anyway? Mark wrote, "But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him." I think we can all relate to being confused and afraid to ask, especially when the answer is something we *don't* want to hear.

Lucky for us, Jesus knew exactly what they were arguing about. That's probably why he decided to do a sit down and deliver moment with them. Right then and there. That's probably why he grabbed the nearest child and took it into his arms to help land his takeaway message for them and for us. However, for us, the double shock of this move is largely lost here in the US in 2024. Children in our culture are cherished, protected, they hold the center of our hearts, attention, time and money. But children in ancient Israel had no social status whatsoever. They were considered non-persons. Expendable. Children were neither to be seen or heard until they reached the age of 13. No child in that culture would ever experience the lavish, loving attention we offer during an infant baptism, like we just did for Caroline. With 50 of her family and friends here for the occasion, a children's parade and a meal. All to share in the joy of her being, her birth, her being named and claimed as God's own, Christ's own forever. And we did the same last week for Mason Luchterhand. As we love to do for all our children and grandchildren.

Not so for the child in our text today. That particular child could have been the child of a servant, for all we know. Although the practice of slavery is abhorrent and sinful to us, it was a part of the cultural milieu of Jesus' time. His references to it are jarring, and a full discussion of slavery in the Bible is a worthy topic for another sermon. The point for us today is how Jesus calls us to see him as servant as slave. The absolute least of the least. Yes, our King of Kings, Lord of Lords; Our Lord and Savior, choosing to identify with "the least of these." Jesus connecting greatness with humble service. Again, and again. But do we get it? *Elachistoi* is the Greek word in the gospels that we translate as "the least of these." *Elachistoi* literally means the most insignificant, the most expendables, the invisible non-persons. You want to be great? Welcome just one of them, and you are welcoming me. That's greatness in God's eyes and mine. And here

he takes this idea up a notch from his parable in Matthew 25. In Mark, he says you are not only welcoming me, but the one who sent me.

St. Mother Teresa has said, "In this life we cannot do great things. We can only do small things with great love." A grand slam disciple move looks like a cup of cold water for a thirsty child. And sandwich packed for the Nutrition on Weekends program for local food insecure children. A wheelchair or rollator for a person who needs it. A birth certificate for your child which was lost when you had to flee for your life and the life of your children. A week's worth of groceries from SOS, clothes and supplies for school from Best First Day. Never underestimate the value of new duds to start school right.

Henri Nouwen in his book titled, *The Selfless Way of Christ: Downward Mobility and the Spiritual Life*, wrote: "The story of our salvation stands radically over and against the philosophy of upward mobility. The great paradox which scripture reveals to us is that real and total freedom is only found through downward mobility. The Word of God came down to us and lived among us as a slave. The divine way is the downward way." And this downward way contradicts the mythology of our culture... It seems nearly impossible for us to believe that any good can come from powerlessness. In this country of pioneers and self-made people, in which ambition is praised from the first moment we enter school until we enter the competitive world of free enterprise, we cannot imagine that any good can come from giving up power or not even desiring it."

We are taught that power is good, yes?" That power is what greatness looks like in our culture, yes? I invite us all to claim a different power. Jesus' downward power of humble service to the "least of these." According to Jesus, the way we treat the youngest aka the powerless and vulnerable is a primary measure of discipleship. How are we doing in caring for our children? For the children of the world? Wendell Berry just wrote an article in which he tells this hard truth that we need to hear: "We have become a society of people who cannot prevent our own children from being killed in their classrooms—and who do not much mind the killing of other people's children by weapons of war. Sooner or later, we will have to ask how we can so devalue the lives of other people's children without, by the same willingness, devaluing the lives of our own." He proclaims that "child killing is the plainest measure of our betrayal of what we used to call our humanity."<sup>i</sup> Betrayal too, of our Lord Jesus Christ, yes? Are we not betraying Jesus every time a child dies by violence or poverty? Tough questions this text calls us to face.

How are we doing with our children here? And the children we know are suffering from being unhoused, displaced by war, disease, hunger? What weight do Jesus' words have as we look at the refugee crisis around the world, children who have only lived the midst of war in Gaza, Ukraine, for as long as they can remember, children separated from their parents at the border, or children hungry in the school down the block? Yes, this is still on the test. I believe we are all good students who know the right answer. Teacher Jesus has taught us what greatness look like in God's kingdom. The question is, will we live it?

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<sup>i</sup> Wendell Berry, "Against Killing Children," (*Christian Century*, October 2024), p. 42