

A Servant Heart

September 22, 2024

Scripture Reading: Mark 9:30-37

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."

Opening

A couple of weeks ago I attended a pastor's retreat in Atlanta. It was a wonderful, meaningful time spent with other pastors from around the country.

During the retreat, we were taken to Ebenezer Baptist Church, where Sen. Raphael Warnock is currently serving as Senior Pastor. It is the same church where Rev. Martin Luther King Sr served as Senior Pastor, and where Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr grew up and eventually served as co-pastor. As I stood in this historic church listening to stories about the ways its members and leaders have lived out their faith over the years, and their deep commitment to social justice, I couldn't help but wonder about my own spiritual life... The experience invited me to pause, and reflect - about my calling, who I am, who I am becoming, and who I want to be.

This wondering continued this week as I spent time thinking about and studying this passage. I was reminded again of this quote from Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, "Everyone has the power for greatness, not for fame but greatness, because greatness is determined by service."

Greatness is determined by service.

I think deep down, maybe we know that. If I were to ask, who is the greatest person you've ever known - I think many of us would name the saints in our lives who have given generously, loved deeply, and served others wholeheartedly. Few of us would jump to name folks simply based on success, power, or wealth. And yet, often when we think about the word greatness - those tend to be the words that come to mind first.

Just out of curiosity, I googled the word greatness, and the AI summary offered this definition, "Greatness is a noun that means the quality or state of being great, such as in terms of size, power, skill, or achievement. It can also refer to a state of superiority that affects a person or object in a particular area or place." That tracks...right? But, then, at the bottom, it also said this: "The perception of greatness can be subjective and contested, and may vary from person to person."

In our passage this morning, Jesus contests this definition of greatness, and he seeks to help his disciples understand why.

Chapter Structure

At first glance it may seem a little odd that this debate over greatness immediately follows a prediction of Jesus' death and resurrection. But, the author of this gospel did

this deliberately. In fact, these middle chapters in Mark were strategically placed in a particular order to tell a greater story.

These middle chapters in Mark begin and end with healing stories where vision is restored. And then, the stories sandwiched in between follow a certain pattern. There are 3 different passion predictions, and each one is followed by an incident that demonstrates the disciple's struggle to grasp Jesus' mission and what it means to be his follower. From the first healing of a blind man to the last, these events are placed in an order that shows Mark's readers that the disciples are on a journey of understanding, moving towards a clearer *vision* of who Jesus is and *seeing* what it means to really follow Jesus. At the heart of these passages, and at the heart of the gospel, is the true meaning of discipleship.

Confusion About the Messiah

Our passage this morning shows up in the middle of this larger story. For a second time, Jesus predicts his death. The disciples do not understand - and they are too afraid to ask him. In her book, *The Gospel of Mark*, Amy Jill Levine explains that contemporary Jewish messianic expectations didn't include a suffering, dying, and rising messiah. So, even as the disciples accepted that Jesus was the Messiah, there was still a disconnect between what Jesus was saying about himself and his future, and what they expected him to be. They struggled to accept Jesus' **way** of being the Messiah.

Greatness

This disconnect becomes even clearer when Jesus asks them what they were arguing about along the way.

Who is greatest among them?

In the Roman Empire, status, power, and wealth were of the highest value. In many ways, it's not so different from the world we live in.

But Jesus isn't interested in status, or power, or wealth. And if the disciples are really going to follow him, especially after his death, they need to understand this. So he tells them, if you really want to be first - if you really want to be great - then you need to be a servant to all. In those days, the servant to all was the servant at the very bottom of the social order. The one that ate last. Then, to further demonstrate his point, he picks up a child - an example of another person in society without power or social status - and he says, "*Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.*"

Every single human being is beloved. Every single human being is inherently valuable. Because they are. Period. But that's not always the way the world operates or sees things. In countless ways throughout history, humans have built walls, created categories, and systems that determine the value or importance of others, and benefited some at the expense of others. In this story, Jesus wants his disciples to grasp that the values of human societies are often deeply flawed, and that the real heart of discipleship is service to others. The measure of their greatness is not in the power they have, but how they use their power. Their greatness is not in the wealth they have, but in how they spend their money. Their greatness is not in what they achieve, but in how they treat their neighbors.

Someone in class today expressed that they don't like the word greatness because it encourages comparison. That it leads to people seeing themselves as better or less than others. That is exactly what Jesus is pushing against in this passage. Disciples are no better, or more valuable than those they serve. Disciples are to recognize the value and dignity of every person... and then seek to build communities where all people are honored in ways that reflect their true value.

Everyone has the power for greatness - because true greatness is found in generosity, and kindness, and compassion, and the ways that we care for and serve one another. When we care for each other - we care for God. That is how we love God.

Conclusion

The truth is, the disciples struggle to get it, because it's hard to grasp. Discipleship, and service are counter intuitive to the ways we are often taught to live, survive, and thrive. So, it can be difficult for us too. But just like the disciples, and the early church community that Mark wrote to - we are on a journey of discipleship. We are coming to see more clearly who Jesus is and who we are called to be as we continue on the way. Discipleship is a journey. We are constantly learning and growing, and invited to re-evaluate and reimagine.

I am grateful for the time I had to get away and to surround myself with stories of true greatness, and imagine again the meaning of my call to discipleship and what it means to serve others. I am thankful for Sunday mornings and other times, when we gather together to grapple with difficult teachings and questions. And I am thankful that discipleship is not a journey we walk alone.

Family of God, may we continue to reimagine what true greatness means for us - as people of faith, and as a community of love.

