

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost September 19 2021

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

What is greatness?

If I asked you to define greatness, or what makes someone great, how would you do it? What words would you use?

The conversation about who is the greatest pops up most clearly in sports. Have you heard the term GOAT (Greatest of all time). It has gotten popular in the last 30-40 years and comes up in conversations about who should get that title. It's been applied to Simone Biles, Michael Jordan and Tom Brady. Muhammed Ali in an interview just before his fight with Sonny Liston claimed, "I am the greatest". Hockey player Wayne Gretzky was given the name The Great One, by a sports reporter when he was only 10. That title was also one given to the actor Jackie Gleason.

These are all people at the top of their field, excellent in their craft, standouts in what they do. First among their peers and competitors.

This is a core part of our society, isn't it? To be first, to stand out. We want to be the dominant sports team, to be drafted first into the NFL, to earn more money than everyone else, to get more likes, have more subscribers. If you really stop and think about it, would you disagree if I said this was the basic framework in which we operate as a society. The drive to be the one noticed- which in this social media age is almost as good as doing something of worth.

And yet, you could argue, we also have another impulse. We do hold up people like Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Jr., on a more local basis Willie Ray Fairley. People who focus on helping the poor, the oppressed, giving voice to those who are ignored in the public sphere. We admire these great people.

But even then, I wonder. Is this admiration not tainted a bit by the same competitive definition of greatness we have adopted? That they are great not because they feed the hungry, march for civil rights, speak for justice, but because they do it better than everyone else.

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You could expand that question beyond an individual to a team, to a city, or a society, a nation. What makes a nation great? Tom Brokaw labeled the generation that survived the Depression, fought and won World War II, and rebuilt the world as the Greatest Generation. Former President Trump's campaign slogan was to Make America Great Again.

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This is the question being discussed by the disciples as they follow after Jesus who is traveling the road to Jerusalem. What precedes their conversation is the second time Jesus tells them what his fate will be – betrayal and arrest, death, resurrection. But they don't understand what he's saying -maybe an echo of Peter's response last week, pulling Jesus aside and saying, "hey man, this isn't the playbook for being Messiah!" Messiah is about winning, about being the greatest, about being more powerful, righteous, and wise than anyone else. They

don't understand what Jesus is saying, and they are afraid to ask him for clarification.

I wonder about that fear. Are they afraid because of what they think Jesus' reaction might be? Or is it because they really, deep down, don't want to know the answer. Because they have some intuitive sense that it will mean a total rethinking of their lives and priorities.

One way or the other, the disciples are talking to one another along the way, a dialogue where they are trying to work out- what? The translation we heard is they are trying to figure out, "who is the greatest". However, you could just as easily translate it as them arguing about "what is greatness". The latter at least implies they are beginning to struggle a bit with what Jesus has laid before them. That they understand some change in their way of thinking needs to occur.

While Jesus asks the question, "What were you talking about on the way" you can guess that like any parent- he knows darn well what's been going on. When he gets no answer other than everyone suddenly finding something of interest on the floor, Jesus gathers the disciples and sits (the posture taken when a rabbi teaches) and once again tries to get them to understand what he is calling them to, what his own mission is.

You want to be first? He's using that as the synonym for greatness, you want to be first? Then you have to be last, go to the end of the line. In fact, you have to be the servant, the waiter, the one working diligently to meet the needs of everyone else.

Now, think about that for a moment. If we all took the energy, effort, creativity, and drive that we put into being first, being the greatest, and funneled that into seeking to serve everyone else. What would the world look like? Just imagine that for a second. It's hard, because we've been so conditioned by the economic system we've grown up in, but there are times I can catch just a glimpse of it in my imagination.

Might it look something like Dan Price's Seattle based company Gravity Payments. Around 2015, Price decided to forgo his large salary to enable him to pay all his employees at least \$70,000 (in fact, that's his current salary). Since then, revenues have tripled, the workforce has grown 70%, and there is a 10-fold increase in home ownership and having kids among his employees. When the pandemic hit, his employees asked to anonymously volunteer to take pay cuts that totaled half a million dollars a month. He had to cap the donation at 50%. The company survived and employees said they have all been paid back the money they volunteered.

Is greatness excellence? Or is it just in the striving towards the right goal?

Do I have to out "Mother Teresa" Mother Teresa to be great according to Jesus? I don't think so. It seems to me that would be falling into the same trap we're in now. Greatness lies in the goal I am striving for; it lies in what we as individuals and as a group value. It doesn't lie in how "well" we do it. That's the grace of God at work. Grace means God sees the scribbly artwork of our lives as the greatest masterpiece. When we aim for the right goal.

The author of James knows all about the trouble with goals. If we strive for things because of bitter envy or selfish ambition. If we let the desires within us come

crashing out, then this leads to disorder and wickedness of every kind. This happens when we pursue that idea of greatness that means I have to be first, top dog, better than everyone else.

But if we focus on Jesus' definition of greatness- to be last of all and servant of all- if we pursue that with humility, if we are willing to yield to others and be last, if we are full of mercy towards others, then what will be sown in our lives and the lives of those around us is peace. A peace we can never have when we gain things by force, or even by our hard work and talent. For even then, one day, the talent will fade, the body and mind will falter, and someone new will be the greatest.

This is the joy of Jesus' definition. Regardless of how old or talented or wealthy you are, every day you can wake up and strive for greatness. Strive to be last, to give way, to serve others and their needs.

What is greatness? Let us be like the disciples and talk about this as we follow Jesus on the way, sit at his feet to listen closely to what he has to say, and strive with all that we are to follow it. Trusting that in doing so we will find peace, we will receive grace, and we will find life fuller and more abundant.