

“The Greatest”

Mark 9:30-37

Rev. Katelyn Gordon

First Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, NC

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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 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.”

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A record was set on Wednesday night of this past week. Almost 23 million people tuned in to watch the second GOP debate on CNN. That number of viewers - 23 million - breaks the network's previous record of 16.8 million viewers that was set in 1993.

On Wednesday night, the political hopefuls cared less about what the number of viewers meant for the network and more about what that number meant for them. There were 23 million people who could hear them detail his or her personal experiences and qualifications to be the next Leader of the Free World AND why the others shouldn't be.

All of this competing and arguing about who's the best candidate for president, who's the greatest - it almost sounds like they've been taking notes from the disciples in this morning's gospel reading. Imagine their debate with me -

Peter is prepared. He's imagined having this argument before. As soon as there's an opening in the conversation, Peter fires off a bullet point list of his personal characteristics and proven discipleship abilities that confirm why he is the greatest of the twelve. He concludes his list by reminding the others that Jesus had called him to be a disciple before anyone else. He was first - a point that seems to be made out of some desperation and, knowing Peter, probably a point he has made before if only to his brother Andrew.

Amazingly, Andrew keeps his mouth shut but silently recalls that, depending on who you talk to, *he* was the first disciple - or at the very least Jesus called him at the same time he called Peter. Andrew does what brothers do and makes a mental list of all the reasons why Peter is not the greatest but is, in fact, the worst. It's a long list that includes Peter's tendency to be around for the good times and then to turn on you when things get difficult.

James points out that Jesus had chosen him to go up the mountain with him to witness the Transfiguration. Even though James doesn't really understand what happened

at the Transfiguration, he must be important if Jesus wanted him to be there. That should count for something.

John doesn't say anything at all until Judas – whom everyone is a little skeptical of – speaks up and says he's the most important because he's the one who keeps track of the money. As if that's the most important thing. John says quietly, "Well I do become known as the beloved disciple."

Thomas rolls his eyes and exchanges an exasperated look with Matthew, who shares his irritation with John's self-assurance that borders on arrogance and his overly pious tone of voice.

Jesus watches the group of grown men walking ahead of him on the road and sighs. He can tell from their body language and the volume of their voices that something is going on...and it's not good.

We might want to shake our heads at those disciples too. How silly to get into that kind of argument...

Maybe we should cut them some slack and consider that the disciples have had a rough go of it lately. Just before the passage we read this morning, the disciples were publicly humiliated. They had walked into a village and were immediately recognized as the men who were friends with Jesus. It was like they were celebrities - a crowd had gathered to see them, people wanted to meet them, and a man asked them to heal his son who had been suffering with a spirit for years.

Peter, James, and John were still high off of the Transfiguration. For as long as they lived, they'd never be able to find the right words to describe that experience. The vision of Jesus surrounded by such an intensely bright light, the appearance of Elijah and Moses – men they'd never seen before in person but instantly recognized. In that moment, they knew Jesus was different, and somehow they knew they were different now too...though they weren't sure exactly how.

So when the man stepped forward with the terrible story about his son and with the hope that the disciples could heal the young boy, they thought, maybe this is it. Their hearts beat faster, and the crowd held its collective breath while Peter laid hands on the convulsing child. Nothing happened. John placed his hands too on the boy's shoulders and adopted that overly pious tone of voice as he spoke words he thought he remembered hearing Jesus say before in this kind of situation. James squeezed his eyes shut with the hopes that concentrating harder was the trick. But nothing happened.

As the seconds ticked by, the disciples could feel the energy of the crowd shift from excited anticipation to disappointment and then to anger. The people around them started to argue – casting blame, pointing fingers, making snide remarks about how these disciples were a bunch of phonies who weren't capable of doing anything much less performing a miracle.

Jesus stepped in and saved the day and the boy but not without letting off some steam in the process. He talked to the crowd in a tone of voice the disciples had never heard before – "You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you?"

Jesus' frustration was obvious. The disciples were mortified. And when they left Galilee with Jesus - with their tails tucked between their legs - it only got worse. Jesus started telling them again about this strange thing that would happen to him, the Son of Man - that he will be killed and then three days after he's killed he will rise again. The disciples knew what the individual words meant, but when you put them all together, well, it didn't make any sense to them. Maybe on another day they would've asked Jesus to explain himself, but not today when their egos were so freshly bruised.

So to make themselves feel better, they argued.

It's such a human thing to do, isn't it? It's one of our go-to activities when life and/or people have made aware of our inadequacies that we usually try to ignore; it's what we do when we are confronted with an unwelcome reminder that we are not as in-charge and in-control as we'd like to think we are.

In our better moments, we *might* be willing to sit in that space of being humbled and reflect on what the experience can teach us about ourselves and about God and what we can learn from the experience that will help us be better people in the future.

But a lot of times, when our pride is hurt, we just argue. We argue because it's a quick way, we think, to restore our pride and sense of self. We have silly arguments over things like which way the toilet paper roll should go (over or under?) or what's the proper way to load and unload the dishwasher. We argue about who knows the best way to get to the airport or what's the right way to fold your socks.

In the church, we argue about things like what color the carpet should be in the sanctuary or what size the choir loft should be or who gets to use the church parlor and for what reasons. Sometimes, in our own churchy ways, we even end up arguing about who's the greatest.

I said these arguments are silly, and they often are about seemingly silly things - but that doesn't mean that they don't point us to some important truths about ourselves. It was ridiculous - childish even - for the disciples to be arguing about who was the greatest. And they knew it. We know they knew it because they were too embarrassed to say anything when Jesus asked them what was going on.

But for whatever reason, that hadn't stop them from having the argument in the first place. Their egos had taken over, and they had felt too insecure. They felt like they had failed big time in front of a crowd of people and in front of Jesus and like they failed again when they didn't understand what Jesus said to them about his death and resurrection...

Peter, Andrew, James, Judas, John, Thomas, Matthew - the whole dozen of them - they have this idea of who they are supposed to be as the ones in Jesus' inner circle, and it doesn't include making fools of themselves in front of other people. But that's exactly what they did. So now they find themselves wondering about who they are if they aren't good disciples? If they can't be who they think Jesus is asking them to be, do they have a place at all?

I wonder if you've ever feel like you're not a good disciple of Jesus. I'll tell you that this is not an unfamiliar feeling for me. I try my best to do and say what I believe will

please God, and I fail regularly. If you don't ever feel this way, maybe we should talk – there's a reason we have a prayer of confession in worship every week ☺

In all seriousness, we aren't that much different from those disciples in that too often we operate with a particular idea of what a good disciple looks like and should be able to do. And like the original disciples, we're not immune from letting our egos get in the way. Our pride gets hurt sometimes too, and we're not above ranking ourselves based on our own list of "good disciples" criteria.

Even if only in our minds, we've been know to try figure out who's the greatest – the greatest prayer, teacher, leader, host, preacher, musician – and if we don't do this about individual people, we might do it by comparing ourselves with other congregations – who has the greatest formation classes, the best mission outreach programs, the most exciting contemporary worship service, the fastest growing congregation...

It can be exhausting to be caught up in this type of comparison, but more than that, it isn't faithful, which is what Jesus seems to be telling his disciples – both the original ones and his present-day ones – in this morning's passage.

"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant to many," Jesus says. Forget about yourself and stop worrying about if you're the best; spend more time noticing how you can serve others.

"Whoever welcomes a child in my name welcomes me," Jesus says. Knowing Jesus, he was intentional about using a child as his illustration. Biblical and historical scholars will tell you that children were at the bottom of the social strata in Jesus' day. They weren't important people – probably better seen than heard – and they certainly weren't the people you'd focus on if you were interested in success and prestige.

The other thing about children – that I think Jesus must have known and anyone who spends time with or around child knows – is that they are not always the most pleasant people. They can be demanding and selfish and messy, and they're not concerned with making you look good. The mom whose child uses his outside voice to ask, "Is that woman pregnant?" in the grocery store knows that. Children, in their own way, make us get beyond ourselves and participate in the larger world.

With his words and his actions, Jesus shows us that great discipleship looks like leading by following, serving because we have been served, feeding because we have been fed, welcoming because we have been welcomed, forgiving because we have been forgiven, offering grace because we have been offered grace, and loving because we have been loved first – all by the God who sent Jesus Christ into the world to walk with us.

As I have spent time with this text this week, it's become about identity for me. Jesus has re-taught me this week where I find my identity. In the world today, it seems like we will leave no stone unturned in efforts to figure out who we are, what makes us important.

What the Gospels assures us is that our truest identity is found and rooted in God's mercy and love that most clearly comes to us in Jesus Christ.

Admittedly, that doesn't always seem to count for much to a world that tells us our identity is actually tied up in how well we perform or how much we produce, and there are plenty of other places where we can look for our identity. Schools want to tell us who we

are with grades and scholarships; sports teams want to tell us who we are with trophies and championships; corporations want to tell us who we are with bonuses based on sales goals and the number of new clients you brought to the firm.

It can be hard – so very hard – not to confuse the world’s view of us with what is really true about us, to remember that our core identity – for us as individuals and as a community – is grounded in God’s love for us.

So it helps that we get to come together each week to re-center and be re-membered in the body of Christ as we worship. It helps that we get to celebrate baptisms together and that we’re offered a reminder of who we are every time we hear those words that Pen said to Noah and Charles in this morning’s baptism – “You are loved and chosen by God.”

We can repeat those words to ourselves when we go about our daily lives in classrooms and surgical rooms, in board meetings and in coffee shops, at work and at home, with our colleagues and with the stranger in line next to us in the grocery store. Let this truth about you – that you are a beloved child of God and a follower of Jesus – inform how you think about yourself and how you interact with others. There’s something about knowing this truth about yourself that can transform your life and your relationships – not because of what you’re doing but because of God does through you.

What a gift and a challenge it is to be called to serve as a disciple, to let our lives be shaped by the One who created us, knit us together in our mother’s womb, and calls us to follow Christ, who is the greatest.

Thanks be to God. Amen.