

“You’re the Greatest”  
Mark 9:30-37  
Sunday, September 20, 2015  
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

**Opening.**

A woman once asked the children in her Sunday School class this question:

“If I sold my house and my car, had a big garage sale and gave all my money to the church, would that get me into Heaven?”

“NO!” the children all answered.

“If I cleaned the church every day, mowed the yard, and kept everything neat and tidy, would that get me into Heaven?”

Again, the answer was, “NO!”

“Well, then, if I was kind to animals and gave candy to all the children and loved my husband, would that get me into Heaven?” she asked them again.

Again, they all answered, “NO!”

“Well,” she continued, “then how can I get into Heaven?” A five-year-old boy shouted out, “YOU GOTTA BE DEAD!”

The disciples go beyond wondering how to get into heaven. In today’s gospel reading, they, “argued with one another who was the greatest” (v. 34). They want to get into heaven, sure; but they also want to be the greatest in heaven – right hand of Jesus the King and all.

**I. Who da biggest?**

There’s an iconic video in my family of Josh and Chris – my two sons -- when they were little; little enough to still be in highchairs at mealtime. We were visiting their cousin, “baby Ryan,” in Indiana. “Baby” Ryan is now 21 and engaged to be married. At that time we referred

to him as “baby Ryan” because he had two older brothers. He and Chris are the same age, but somehow Chris was simply Chris, not “baby” Chris.

Anyway, the three boys – baby Ryan, Chris, and Josh – are all in highchairs at the kitchen table. And out of the blue, baby Ryan says, “I da biggest,” and holds his arms way up in the air, just as proud as can be.

Well, of course, Josh & Chris – not to be outdone – throw their arms in the air, as well, shouting, “No, I da biggest!” “No, I da biggest!” No, I da biggest!” This goes on for quite a while, with my sister-in-law and I laughing and laughing, and videotaping the whole event.

Chris and baby Ryan were each a little over a year old; Josh was around 3.

This is the level of sophistication exhibited by the disciples. “I da greatest!” “No, I da greatest!”

“REALLY?!?” says Jesus. “I don’t THINK so!!” In fact, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all” (v. 35). And then he brings out a child as an example, for good measure. And he reminds them of his own, ultimate example – that he expects to be betrayed (by *them!*), killed, and, after three days, rise again.

Lest we think we are somehow superior to the poor disciples, hear this story as told by Harry B. Adams:

“On one occasion I was responsible for making the seating arrangements at a head table. At one end of the table a person with experience was placed next to a newcomer in order to make him feel welcome. When the experienced person saw his place card, he promptly picked it up and moved it to the center of the table, next to the person who would be presiding. It takes a certain amount of chutzpah to do such a thing, and the action reveals a profound need to be in a perceived status position.”

Status is everything in our society, as it was in first century Galilee, as it is in every human culture. The ways of defining status may differ, but we humans always find ways to determine who's "da biggest" or who's "da greatest." Sometimes it's money; sometimes it's appearance. Maybe it's the property we own, or the schools we've attended. It can even be the battle of who's the most humble – if I'm so proud of the fact that I'm more humble than you are, how humble is that?

In some circles the color of a person's skin still matters. Or it's gender; or it's age – in some situations youth is worshipped; in other contexts, only the eldest is given a voice. Our current culture is, you may have noticed, a youth-oriented culture. Elders are not respected as much as they ought to be.

In a Presidential election year it's entertainment – watching the potential candidates jockey for position. Who will win the competition for the highest political office in the nation? Who da biggest? Who da greatest?

We struggle with these questions in our own lives – feeling "less than" or "greater than" – depending on who we're comparing ourselves to. We do this in our personal lives with family and friends. We do this in our professional lives with colleagues and competitors. We definitely do this in the church – grieving over the decline of the mainline church; comparing ourselves to the megachurches and coming up short.

In the midst of all this very human struggle for greatness, what does Jesus teach?

## **II. Upside-down, kingdom values.**

Well, for one thing, Jesus teaches about how to bring life in the midst of death. He tells the disciples that people will soon betray and kill him. But just as he will be raised from the dead, so the Christian community will rise up out of his death and resurrection. And the way to

behave in the Christian community is not to seek power and prestige. The way to behave in the Christian community is to be a servant of all, just as Jesus becomes the ultimate servant when he goes to the cross.

Jesus teaches about the kingdom, using children as an example. Children are the weakest and most vulnerable – the “least” among us. But Jesus lifts them up as the greatest, the most valuable. “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name,” says Jesus, “welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me” (v. 37).

A Father and his son were out walking one day when the little boy asked how electricity could go through the wires stretched between the telephone poles. “I don't know,” said his father. “I never knew much about electricity.” A few blocks farther on, the boy asked what caused lightning and thunder. “That too has puzzled me,” came the reply. The youngster continued to inquire about many things, none of which the father could explain. Finally, as they were nearing home, the boy said, “Pop, I hope you didn't mind all those questions.” “Not at all,” replied his father. “How else are you going to learn!” (Our Daily Bread)

Jesus has a different understanding of greatness. The disciples define greatness by the world's values. Jesus defines greatness by kingdom values. Jesus uses a child as the ultimate symbol of greatness in the kingdom of God. The Syrian refugee children, so much in the news right now, come to mind.

Like the father in the story, we may not have answers to all the questions – or any of the questions. Jesus teaches us to begin by altering our perspective on greatness. Jesus teaches us, as always, to turn the world upside down, to make the kings and presidents and billionaires and CEO's last, and the refugee children first. To declare the wealthy and the powerful the least in the kingdom, and the weak and the poor the greatest.

This teaching of Jesus goes against the grain of our society. The suckers are the ones with the soft hearts – the do-gooders, the losers. Those who make it in this world have to be tough. They have to take care of themselves first. Then, once they have power and money and recognition, maybe they can help a charity here and there. But realistically speaking, we can't save the world, so we'd better save ourselves. At least we'll be the greatest in our corner of the world.

Or how about this perspective: If we do enough good in the world, then we get into heaven. We may even be the greatest in God's kingdom. As long as we help others, and don't have too much money and don't have too much power and don't claim too much recognition for our good deeds, we're pretty sure we'll be O. K. Certainly God loves us more than those power-grubbing people. Especially those power-grubbing politicians.

Edward, The Prince of Wales and son of Queen Victoria was at his mother's side near the moment of her death when a member of the royal household said, "I wonder if the Queen will be happy in heaven?"

Edward said, "I don't know; she will have to walk behind the angels, and she won't like that."

What the prince failed to appreciate is the greatness of Victoria's role, not as the monarch of an empire, but as a person with a deep understanding of duty expressed in self-discipline and devotion to others. (Brent Porterfield)

True kingdom humility has nothing to do with our status in society, whether high or low. And it has nothing to do with self-deprecation, either. Genuine humility is a true assessment of oneself. For the Christian, our true self-assessment is made in relationship to Jesus and his teachings. We use whatever gifts and resources we have to serve the weak and the vulnerable,

the least and the lowest, wherever we encounter them.

And – here’s the good news! – when we are at our lowest and most vulnerable...when we feel like the least and the lost...Jesus declares, “You’re the greatest!”

Why is this? When we are at our lowest, we experience some of the suffering that Jesus endured for our sakes. When we are at the end of our own power and knowledge and understanding, that’s when we are most open to experiencing God’s power at work. And when we join the ranks of the least, we learn to have the compassion that Jesus desires for us.

The truth is that power in the Christian community always comes in surprising ways. The Holy Spirit sweeps in and blesses the most unlikely enterprises. At the same time, the goals we might consider most worthy don’t receive even a cold ember from the flame of the Spirit. We must learn to trust God, as children trust a loving parent.

There’s a story about a woman who had been trying for years to persuade her egotistical husband to change his ways. He was obsessed with being number one. He never stopped talking about being first in sales at the office. He proclaimed that he was first on the list for the next promotion. He had to be first in line to buy tickets for a game and also the first to hit the parking lot after the game.

One day this man's long-suffering wife watched with interest as he stepped on one of those fortune-telling scales. He dropped a coin in the slot and out came a little fortune-telling card that read: “You are a born leader, with superior intelligence, quick wit, and a charming manner. You have a magnetic personality and are attractive to the opposite sex.”

“Read that!” he said to his wife with a hint of gloating. She did, and then turned the card over and said: “It has your weight wrong too” (David W. Miller).

## **Closing.**

Radio commentator Earl Nightingale once told the story of an angry father shouting, “Why don't you grow up?” at his 12-year-old son. The boy struggled to control his tears, but finally blurted out amid the sobs, “That's what I'm trying to do!” (James R. Oraker)

I don't know about you, but sometimes I feel like that 12-yr.-old boy. I want to grow up faster in the faith. I cry out to Jesus, “That's what I'm trying to do!”

And you know what I invariably hear, through the whisperings of his Holy Spirit?

“Stop trying.”

When we stop trying...when we let go of prestige and power and status...when we see the world through a child's eyes...when we let go and allow Jesus to turn our world upside-down...when we accept being “last of all and servant of all”...

That's when we hear Jesus saying, “You're the greatest!”

Amen.