

9.22.2024 Pentecost 18

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Jeremiah 11;18-20; Psalm 54; James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37

“Who is the greatest?”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

The disciples’ question about “Who is the greatest?” continues to be argued about today. At times it seems like we have never heard a single word Jesus has spoken. As human beings we continue to argue about who is the greatest.

Yet all of us also know true greatness when we see it. We know the selflessness of someone who, though he or she has wealth and power, works for the betterment of others. We recognize the greatness of someone who, without any self-promotion or profit, lifts the weak and protects the vulnerable. We still recognize the servanthood of Christ when we see it.

Today’s readings are meant to help us answer the question of greatness. Psalm 54 begins with the words, “*Save me, O God, by your name.*” These words ask us: “In whose name do you live? In whose name do you pray and ask?” The question of greatness begins with a humility that knows a name greater than mine or any other. Answering the question, “Who is the greatest?” demands that we ask in the name of the one greater than ourselves.

The reading from James also asks a question concerning greatness. James asks, “*Who is wise and knowledgeable among you?*” For James greatness begins with a gentleness born of wisdom. James says such wisdom is “*pure, peaceable, gentle, yielding, and full of mercy.*” James is comparing the wisdom of God with its human counterparts: “*envy, selfish ambition, disorder, and wickedness.*”

Woe be it to us if we cannot distinguish between the *peaceable, gentle, tolerant, and merciful wisdom* of God and *envy, selfishness, disorderliness, and wickedness* of human beings. We see it around us every day: people who use their wealth and power to oppress their neighbors, invade their land; people who seek greatness by demanding the allegiance of others; people who question all truth without offering any wisdom and evidence of their own.

James bluntly asks, “*Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?*” True greatness begins with a fearless ability to see one’s own sinfulness. Greatness begins as we see our own need of God’s grace and forgiveness. We understand greatness wrongly because we do not ask in a name greater than ours.

People are funny. They really are. We will resist everything except our own self-centered wills. We will resist the good we know we should do. We resist the truth, replacing truth with a lie. We resist

those whom we are told are “bad people,” while never seeing our own badness and evil. James writes, “*Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and he will draw near to you.*” Do you resist the evil one who twists truth and power? Daily do you draw near to God, that God might draw near to you?

Jesus’ own disciples also had to learn about greatness. Simply because they walked with Jesus did not mean they understood the temptations to greatness. Just a few paragraphs before today’s gospel, Jesus took Peter, James, and John to a high mountain where he was transfigured before them. There they heard a voice say to them, “*This is my beloved Son; listen to him.*” And just a few paragraphs prior to the Transfiguration, Jesus taught the disciples very clearly about the greatness of self-sacrifice – about self-denial, the cross, and following Jesus.

Therefore, it is astounding that on the way to Capernaum the disciples continued to argue about who was greatest. They did not yet understand Jesus as the Suffering Servant. Though they had seen him transfigured on the mountain and heard of his suffering and cross, they continued to think of Jesus as a great political leader who would perhaps shower upon them, his steadfast disciples, worldly greatness.

When they came to Capernaum, Jesus asked them, “*What were you arguing about on the way?*” He knew what they had been arguing about, but they were silent. It is not a winsome quality, but we often see it: people with the power and resources to do good in this world for others, and rather than helping others, they resist all who will not bow down before their will. They resist all who will not work to advance their name, power, and kingdom in this world. Such people often accomplish very little because they are always fighting about their own greatness while seldom serving others.

Jesus said to the disciples, “*Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.*” And taking a child into his arms, Jesus said, “*Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and also the one who sent me.*” In pointing to a child, Jesus was pointing to someone who cannot yet do anything for themselves, but who nevertheless is valued in God’s sight. This is what we seek to do in our family ministry, helping children and young people grow in their self-identity as God’s beloved children, while also growing into people who serve others.

Yet we have over-sentimentalized this biblical scene: Jesus with the cute cherub-like child. Jesus was aware, however, of the precarious position of children in the ancient world. Children were at the very bottom of the social scale; they could not yet work, fight, or pay for anything by themselves. Children are vulnerable and weak, in need of help as they grow. As students of

antiquity know, children were often abandoned, killed or left exposed to die, or sold into slavery. By taking a small child into his arms, Jesus was forever valuing the lives of children everywhere and going further to say that all who are weak and vulnerable are welcomed as God's children.

The ongoing meaning of welcoming one such child in Jesus' name is the mark of true greatness. The child represents the least and the most vulnerable in a society and nation. The greatness of a nation and its people reside not primarily in their material wealth or military power; greatness resides in how a nation and its people welcome and care for the weakest and most vulnerable in their midst.

Jesus answers the question "Who is the greatest?" by saying, "*Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.*" It is time we recognize that true greatness does not belong to the threatening bullies of the world, the loudest voice, or the richest person; true greatness belongs only to those who serve others. Until we recognize that welcoming and protecting the weak and the vulnerable is what makes a people and a nation great, we will continue to value war instead of peace, violence instead of gentleness, bigotry instead of tolerance, ruthlessness instead of mercy.

Greatness resides in how we welcome and care for the weakest and most vulnerable in our midst. True greatness is only the result of a life lived in service to others. Greatness is not asserted or claimed; it is demonstrated with peacefulness, gentleness, tolerance, and mercy for the least, the oppressed, the vulnerable – for those whom Jesus calls "*the least of these.*"

*Who is the greatest?* At the end of our lives, our answer to that question will be given not by us, but by those whom we have served. At the end of our lives, the question of greatness will be answered by those whom we have welcomed as Christ.

Who is the greatest?

*Whoever is last of all and servant of all. Amen.*