

Defining Greatness

Mark 9:33-37

The scripture this week asks us to think about how we define greatness, what true greatness is, and what it means to be great. Jesus asks the disciples what they are talking about, and they fall silent because they had been arguing with one another about who was the greatest. Then Jesus takes a child into his arms and says to be great you must welcome a child as an equal in my name.

Greatness according to Christ is measured not by how high we climb but how humbly we serve. Regardless of whether we hold a position of power and authority in the world or if we serve in a role that others might deem inconsequential. The call is the same.

Greatness in the Kingdom of God is to love and welcome and support others, especially the vulnerable. Without the expectation it will get us anything in return. It is not about quid pro quo and what I can get for myself.

And so, as it turns out, the definition of greatness is indeed a question of faith, a theological question, and a question that we as faithful disciples are asked to consider. If this were not the case, I think Mark would have left it out. The fact that Mark included this interchange says this is a critical teaching for followers of Christ and means we need to take heed and listen.

Mark is pointing to something important, something essential, about believing in Jesus when he shows how Jesus upended every assumption of greatness that the world deemed as definitive. Because God becoming human decided that greatness is not about separation but solidarity, not about better than but relationship with. Not about self-adulation but empowerment and encouragement of the other.

Greatness is determined by vulnerability, by service and sacrifice, by humility and honor, by truthfulness and faithfulness. We are called to embody this kind of greatness, so that the world can witness the true meaning of greatness born out of love.

Jesus calls us to creatively, courageously act in ways that counter the conventional view of “greatness.” How can we reach out in new directions? Jesus spent most of his time consorting with supposedly “low-status” outsiders, with “sinners” and the “unclean,” with the sick, with the disabled, and with children. Wouldn’t following him mean going where he actually goes and building relationships like the ones he actually builds?

God calls us to true greatness; not the counterfeit greatness of dominance and status, but the genuine greatness of love and generosity. God is dismantling the logic of self-centered, grasping domination and revealing gracious, courageous, neighborly love that underlies creation. Jesus’ predictions of his passion and resurrection help illuminate this deeper reality: Want to save your life? Lose it! That is, turn away from obsessively focusing on “saving your own life” and turn toward your neighbors in love and generosity. Want to be truly great? Quit the climb! Seek instead to be “servant of all,” reaching out especially to the lost and left behind, the downtrodden and disinherited. That’s where Jesus will be, after all, and the Holy Spirit, too, lifting up and transforming the world.

The radical grace of God that Jesus proclaims and lives completely obliterates the world’s notions of greatness based on status, wealth, achievement, etc. Perhaps that is one reason we resist grace so much. It is much more appealing to be great on the world’s terms than on Jesus’ terms. Greatness on Jesus’ terms means being humble, lowly, and vulnerable as a child. Greatness on Jesus’ terms is risky. But as Jesus teaches repeatedly, his way of greatness is also the path of life. Abundant Life!

Think about it – Pray about it – Live it

Bob