

Gospel: Mark 9:30-37

Jesus' teaching and action in this text are directed to the church whenever it is seduced by the world's definition of greatness: prestige, power, influence, and money. The antidote to such a concern for greatness is servanthood.

³⁰[Jesus and the disciples went on] and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it;³¹for 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." ³²But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

³³Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" ³⁴But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. ³⁵He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." ³⁶Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

We are now entering a period of time in our lectionary from the Gospel of Mark that is going to cover a number of passages and words of Jesus that contain a number of jumping off points for themes in preaching. Today's passage starts out with Jesus trying to be alone with his disciples and to make them understand what was going to happen to him, and therefore them, as they make their way toward the Jerusalem event. They do not seem to get it and in fact, are afraid to even ask questions to clarify. However, when they come toward his home turf in Capernaum, Jesus switches the subject. The passage turns to the illustration of power and little children in light of what the disciples had just been talking about.

In the initial verses, we have another clash of understandings between the disciples and Jesus. Jesus is talking about suffering, being betrayed, being killed and the disciples do not get it. Instead, a conversation about Jesus being gone, appears to have inspired them to think about who was great among them. This can really strike us as petty. It's almost as if a dying parent is laying in a room with the large family about to breath their last breaths, and the siblings begin to position themselves on who is going to get the inheritance shares. Who gets the good stuff?

Have you ever had something like this happen to you? Maybe not so much the inheritance battles, but I am guessing that many of you would have some stories to tell in that arena, but rather the issue of "greatness" amidst certain situations of our lives.

We always want the best. We want greatness. We want it from our doctors. We want it from and for our children. We want it in our houses,

in our workplaces, in our investments, in our sports teams. Is that so wrong? I think we can easily figure out that the quest for greatness, often turns inward, often becomes about ego, often comes at the expense of others, often comes by tramping on top of others – this of course is where we get into trouble. The writer of Psalm 10 put it this way: “In arrogance the wicked persecute the poor— let them be caught in the schemes they have devised. For the wicked boast of the desires of their heart, those greedy for gain curse and renounce the Lord. In the pride of their countenance the wicked say, ‘God will not seek it out’; all their thoughts are, ‘There is no God.’ Their ways prosper at all times; your judgements are on high, out of their sight; as for their foes, they scoff at them. They think in their heart, ‘We shall not be moved; throughout all generations we shall not meet adversity.’ And it goes on from there.

You see, we get that often by striving to be great, to be number one, comes at the expense of others. We, perhaps, can often see the pitfalls of greatness, we can see the foolishness of what the disciples are arguing about along the way. Jesus is about to be crucified and they seem to be arguing who gets to stand in the front row. They do not even know what they are seeking in their quest to be the greatest among them.

We might be more subtle in our own lives about this. Sometimes we don’t call things great or use the word “greatness”; sometimes instead we soften it by using code words. Code words like, “gifted”, “skilled”, “very blessed,” when we are really trying to talk about someone, or even our own potential greatness. Again, the striving for doing well, is not being faulted here. The drive to succeed is not being lambasted. It is about the

journey, it is about the goal, it is about the motive, it is about the process, it is about the perspective of how view others around us. It's about how we view other people in relationship to one another, to us, and to God. We do this all the time in various places in our lives, including the church. We measure sometimes for greatness, when really we are striving for God connection.

Pastor Nadia Bolz Weber says, "Never once did Jesus say 'the kingdom of heaven is like a fortune 500 company with super happy shareholders.'" Or, "The kingdom of heaven is like the mega church down the street with 3000 people, 5 services, and a 20 million dollar facility with a perfectly paved parking lot." Or, "The Kingdom of heaven is like the beautifully kept home in that lovely neighborhood where the schools are great and the children are well pressed." No! Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed." Which is something so small you practically need a magnifying glass to see it. We so often feel like we have nothing to offer, that we are not the greatest, when in fact God does God's best work with nothing. God created the universe out of nothing. God put flesh on dry bones. Nothing is God's favorite material to work with. As Nadia writes, "Perhaps God looks upon that which we dismiss as nothing, insignificant and worthless and says, "Ha! Now that I can do something with!" She writes about all of this in her book titled "Pastrix." If you don't know who she is, let me paint a picture for you: Nadia is heavily tattooed, a recovering alcoholic and drug addict, and a Lutheran pastor who often uses some rather direct and salty language. She started a church in Denver by the name of House for All Saints and Sinners that counts among its

members many who society wants to push away. One time, she decided to have Rally Day, thinking it would be a great idea because that's what successful churches do, so why shouldn't she? So she went out and rented a cotton candy maker, and hoped the 6 dozen burgers she bought would be enough, and threw in a few bags of Doritos and chips for good measure. Because, you know, it's Rally Day, so she was expecting a really big crowd, certainly bigger than the 40 or so people the church usually managed to attract. Do you know how many she had that Rally Day Sunday? 26. "After the great idea and the bag of Doritos and the \$300 she spent. After all that, there were fewer people than we'd had all summer."

Perhaps we can relate to that, not just in church programming, not just is comparing congregations, but many other walks of life that we set out to do faithfully? You've gone to all this effort, whether it's a church event or work event or personal event, you do all this stuff and spend all this time and effort on something, only to get to that day, that big event, and think "that's it?" Where are the people, the accolades, the thank yous? That's it, you think to yourself? But what Nadia missed on Rally Day, until she remembered the story of the feeding the 5000, was that 26 was enough. It wasn't nothing for the 26 people who were there. They had fun, they fed homeless people with the extra burgers; they worshipped God; it wasn't nothing. How many of us spend more time focusing on the things we wish happened, we wish were better, we wish we were great, rather than the things that actually are there. God invites us to look at the world around us and see greatness and richness and abundance from a different set of eyes. God invites us to view the world differently. God invites us to

recognize the humanity of one another and God's great act of saving the world in Jesus Christ. Isn't that great? Amen.