

Proper 20 B  
Mark 9:30-37  
September 22, 2024

“True Greatness”  
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

*<sup>30</sup>They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; <sup>31</sup>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.” <sup>32</sup>But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him. <sup>33</sup>Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” <sup>34</sup>But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. <sup>35</sup>He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” <sup>36</sup>Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, <sup>37</sup>“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”*

A little boy was overheard talking to himself as he strutted through the backyard, wearing his baseball cap and toting a ball and bat. “I’m the greatest hitter in the world,” he announced. Then, he tossed the ball into the air, swung at it, and missed. “Strike One!” he yelled. Undaunted, he picked up the ball and said again, “I’m the greatest hitter in the world!” He tossed the ball into the air. When it came down, he swung again and missed. “Strike two!” he cried. The boy then paused a moment to examine his bat and ball carefully. He spit on his hands and rubbed them together. He straightened his cap and said once more, “I’m the greatest hitter in the world!” Again, he tossed the ball up in the air and swung at it. He missed. “Strike three! Wow!” he exclaimed. “I’m the greatest pitcher in the world!”<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> “I’m the greatest hitter in the world,” Jokesoftheday.net:  
<http://www.jokesoftheday.net/joke--I-m-the-greatest-hitter-in-the-world-/201704129>.

We love comparing ourselves to others, don't we? There's a certain satisfaction in knowing that we are the very best at something, or at least that we're better than someone else. I suspect that we all want to be the best – the greatest – at something: the greatest cook, the best gardener, the perfect partner or parent, hockey player, a card-shark par excellence. I suspect that we all want to be the best at something and, let's face it, mastering the perfect chocolate chip cookie or growing the greatest tomato seem like pretty benign examples.

We live, however, in a world of "greats." We love proclaiming the greatest athlete, or sports team, or actor, or president, or nation. If we can't personally *be* the best, at the very least we can know with absolute certainty who the best is – know who's the greatest. In our text from Mark's gospel, the disciples certainly thought they knew who was the greatest among them. Peter knew who was greatest – it was him, of course! And John knew and so did Thomas, and Judas, and Timothy. In their own minds, each of them was greatest – knew Jesus best, followed him most faithfully, loved him most completely. I can relate to these disciples and, if we're honest, I'm guessing most of us can too. And that's what makes Jesus' teaching so very difficult to receive.

*"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."*

I can only imagine what went through the disciples' heads when they heard this teaching. "That doesn't make any sense, Jesus! Everybody knows that the first is never last, that the greatest is never a servant, that if you want to be on top, you've got to stand on the shoulders of others, not be on the bottom of the pile! That's just not how greatness works!"

Jesus knew that. He lived in a world like ours – a world of greats: of great kings, and great emperors, and great armies, and great wealth for the greatest of these. Jesus knew what greatness looked like in the world around him...and he flipped it on its head. Greatness in the Kingdom of God, in the realm of heaven, didn't look anything like greatness in the kingdom of Caesar, in the realm of Rome or ancient Israel. Greatness

didn't look like power over people or wealth for a few and poverty for the masses. No, greatness in the realm of heaven looked like humility, looked like service, looked like welcoming the ones society said had no value. Jesus flipped greatness on its head and he knew it would be difficult for his friends to understand so, he brought a child and set her among them.

While it may be difficult for us to imagine, children in Jesus' time had little value. Of course, their parents loved them, but infant mortality rates were very high and of the babies that survived infancy, less than half would reach adulthood. Adults were the ones with *real* value in Jesus' day. But not for Jesus.

*“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”*

That's true greatness. Jesus painted an all-new portrait of greatness and it didn't look like power or wealth or station. It looked like humility. It looked like service. It looked like welcoming the ones society said had no value. *That* is what greatness in the realm of heaven looks like.

A story is told of three “great” men, towering figures of the twentieth century: Albert Schweitzer, Mahatma Ghandi, and Albert Einstein.

The first, Albert Schweitzer was a brilliant German theologian and philosopher who felt the call of God to work as a missionary doctor in Africa. So, the highly esteemed professor returned to his university as a student of medicine. Family and friends thought him crazy and tried to dissuade him. But Albert was true to his call. He entered medical school in 1905 and spent the next seven years studying, all with the goal of missionary service.

Albert and his wife, Helene, took the long journey to Africa. and set up a hospital in a remote region of Gabon. For the next four decades they treated patients, many walking hundreds of miles to receive help. Despite the remoteness of their location Schweitzer became a celebrated

humanitarian and philosopher, so much so that he was awarded the Nobel Peace prize.

The second, Mahatma Gandhi was, of course, the non-violent activist who brought the British to their knees in India and secured independence for his people.

The third, Albert Einstein was the greatest scientist of his time, perhaps of any time. It's said that throughout his life Albert Einstein had two portraits on the wall of his home – the great scientists Newton and Maxwell. They were an inspiration, they summed up the drive of his life – science. Towards the end of his life, Einstein took their pictures down and replaced them with two others – two great humanitarians, Gandhi and Albert Schweitzer. He explained that it was time to replace the image of success – of greatness – with the image of service.<sup>2</sup>

That's what Jesus was doing in today's reading from Mark's gospel and that's what he was doing throughout his ministry – replacing the image of success, of greatness, with the image of service, of *true* greatness. And that's also how Jesus lived; humbly serving and welcoming all those that society said had no value. Jesus' vision of greatness was countercultural in his day and it is still countercultural in ours. Jesus was a *great* man and as ones who claim to be his disciples in this day and age, we too are called to his kind of greatness. Imagine if greatness in our world were measured by humble service and unconditional welcome – how different the world would be.

May it be so with us, that it may become so with all. Amen.

---

<sup>2</sup> Fr. Scott Hurd. "Portraits of Success," blog.adw.org, September 26, 2011: <https://blog.adw.org/2011/09/portraits-of-success/>.