

20 September 2015 (17th Sunday After Pentecost/25th Sunday in Ordinary Time)
Lafayette Presbyterian Church
“Greatness Reconsidered”
Mark 9:30-37

Earlier this year, a high school senior in Alexandria, Virginia excitedly put out the word that she had been accepted into Harvard and Stanford. Her parents were proud and ecstatic, and immediately phoned relatives in South Korea about their “genius girl.” What is more, she had been offered a five-figure scholarship to both schools. Which one should she choose? Mark Zuckerberg called to encourage her to pick Harvard. And then an amazing thing happened. Because each school wanted her so badly, they got together and offered her a special program where she could enroll at Harvard for two years and Stanford for two. As news spread of this unprecedented arrangement, the girl became a worldwide celebrity. But her fellow students were suspicious. And Harvard and Stanford issued public statements that there was no double-enrollment program in existence. Those letters of admission the girl claimed to have in her possession? Forgeries. The emails? Neither school had sent her any such correspondence. As the truth came out, both the girl and her family felt humiliated as they tried to explain to their relatives overseas what had happened. Why did she make up such a wild tale? Because the pressure from school and her family to achieve, to be great, was so intense, she couldn’t stand to be second best.

Fierce competition is not just a contemporary issue, it has played an integral role in human life for thousands of years. For as long as there have been family and social and political structures of any sort, human beings have wrestled and struggled against each other. Look at Jacob and Esau in the Book of Genesis. The story of their striving is legendary and universal. We see it not only in families, but also in business, in education, and certainly in politics. We not only *want* to be number one within ourselves, we’re *encouraged* by a variety of forces around us to be number one through rewards and perks and praise. As parents, we want our children to succeed in school. We reward them when they get good grades, and hope that they will be successful in a career some day. But what message do we give them when they don’t get good grades? How do we express our approval or disapproval when they fail to live up to expectations? What do we feel about people who aren’t the greatest by conventional public standards?

That is the powerful collection of personal, social, and political pressures Jesus observes at work in the lives of his disciples as they travel together on the road to Capernaum. The reading before us in Chapter 9 is set after the Transfiguration, that frightening and mysterious transformation Jesus underwent on the mountaintop in the presence of Peter, James, and John. Prior to that, Jesus had spoken of his betrayal, suffering, death, and resurrection, and had strongly rebuked Peter for trying to pull him away from what he knew was his calling and destiny. After the Transfiguration, Jesus repeats this description of his destiny two more times, but the disciples don’t challenge him because they feel afraid and confused over what Jesus means by “dying and rising.” How interesting, then, that right after the third time Jesus talks about his destiny, the disciples start arguing amongst themselves. Jesus’ words have gotten to them, and they

have begun to question where they are headed in this journey with Jesus. In the face of this strange unknown that lies before Jesus, what will become of them? Where will they fit in the grand scheme of Jesus' mission, and what does Jesus expect of them?

The disciples are arguing with each other out of their vulnerability, their feelings of confusion and powerlessness. And so, even though they don't answer Jesus when he asks them about their conversation, he understands that he has rocked their world. He can see that each disciple is grasping for any shred of support he can find to make him feel secure, even if it comes at the expense of one of the others. It is as if they have reverted to childhood, when they wanted to be reassured that they were each their mother's favorite. How fitting, then, that Jesus chooses a small child to show the disciples who they are in their deepest need, and to reassure them that their greatness lies not in their accomplishments and sense of security, but in their vulnerability and feeling of dependence. On one level, Jesus' illustration is meant to challenge the disciples' instinct to struggle and contend with each other for power and attention. But on another level, Jesus' embrace of the small child is meant to comfort the disciples, to reassure them their childish argument merely overlays a small child within each of them who can feel absolutely secure in the Kingdom of God.

And so we find greatness reconsidered through the life and teaching of Jesus, revisited and redefined through a seemingly routine argument amongst the disciples about their own feelings of inadequacy in the face of Jesus' stated destiny. To Jesus, though, this was not just a routine argument, but rather a teachable moment about the core of the relationship between God and ourselves. When we are at our most uncertain and insecure, when we feel our most vulnerable and inadequate, that is when we can most powerfully receive God's presence, and receive other people as children of God. That ability to receive God without struggle or competition, is true greatness. Just as children are little sponges, ready to absorb new things and completely open to discovery, so the true spirit of the disciple is one that is completely open to God's leading. Jesus knew that his disciples would need that spirit as the time of his dying and rising drew near.

Certainly for our culture, this passage offers a crucial message of comfort for those who live life under a crushing burden of great expectations. The so-named "genius girl" who faked letters of admission from Harvard and Stanford must have devoted an enormous amount of time and energy to construct the appearance of success and high achievement. Didn't she wonder how long she could maintain such a fiction? Didn't she worry what would happen as the months went by and she was headed to neither Harvard nor Stanford? What ruse would she put together to explain that? But the consequences were obviously of no importance compared with the possibility of her parents' pride and her classmates' envy. In the motif of Jesus' teaching, inside her was a small child who needed to be fully received and embraced as a child of God, not as a future graduate of Harvard or Stanford. Indeed, to become a child of God is the greatest gift any human being can receive.

But in addition to speaking to our culture, this passage from Mark also offers a crucial message of challenge and comfort for the church. The church is surrounded by

pressure and expectation to succeed, to grow, to thrive, to be relevant, to care for the poor and the marginalized, to speak prophetically, and to offer programs that educate and excite. Like the high school student in Alexandria, Virginia, we seem expected to do it all. And as though that were not enough, we experience that pressure in the face of dire predictions about continually shrinking numbers and resources. It is as though we are having to push against a great weight that represents a cultural definition of greatness. Whatever that cultural definition involves, it is far from Jesus' expectations, and certainly far from the example of Jesus' own life and death and rising.

How, then, shall we as individuals and as the church live as children of God in a culture that is saturated with family, social, and political expectations? How can we shift the focus off of ourselves and onto God with us and for us? In the passage before us today from the Letter of James, the author pinpoints our dilemma at a very human level: "You do not have because you do not ask." What is it we do not have? What is it we do not ask? Each of us longs to be great, however we may define greatness—and sometimes our foolish attempts at greatness are both humiliating and laughable. We live with Hollywood dreams and unrealized desires deep within us. We think we will live forever even though we know that we won't. Years ago I walked into the office of a friend of mine who had a sign on the wall above her desk. The sign was titled, "The Secret to Immortality," and it read: "God has given me a fixed set of tasks to accomplish in this life. At the rate I'm going, I am so far behind I will never die." We attempt to laugh at our own desire to be great, to accomplish something significant, to make a difference in the world—and yet we cannot fully shake that calling. Jesus' disciples had the same set of desires. That is why many of them followed Jesus to begin with, because they believed that he would lead them to greatness and victory, whether it was over the Romans or over their own repressive religious structures. But Jesus' response was to match their desire for greatness with the reassurance that they need not fight for it. They could set aside their striving and their foolish schemes to elevate themselves above the pack, and rest in the knowledge that the greatness of their calling and destiny was held and sustained by God the way a loving parent holds and sustains a small child in a secure embrace.

Jesus said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." What burden of unrealized greatness are you struggling to carry? What would it take for you to lay it down, to leave it at Jesus' feet, and to rest in the knowledge that greatness is already yours, ready for the taking. All you need to do is ask. This day, reconsider your expectations, reconsider greatness, and allow yourself to be embraced by Jesus as a child of God whose life is secure. Reconsidering greatness is Jesus' challenge and comfort to all people and to the church.



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