

## What's Wrong With Being The Greatest?

Mark 9:30-37

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Babcock Presbyterian Church

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What's wrong with being the greatest? Apparently nothing if you can prove it, but if you can't you can look pretty foolish.

A young man learned everything he knew about playing pool from an older man he befriended in the neighborhood billiard parlor. The old man enjoyed mentoring the boy because he liked him and he showed promise.

But the young protégé abused his talents. He became a pool shark and took advantage of some of the older man's friends.

One night the old man showed up at the pool hall. The young man boasted, **"Here's my teacher, he taught me everything I know. I bet I can even beat him at his own game."**

The old man accepted the challenge and in very quick order, took his young friend to the cleaners.

Humiliated the boy took his mentor aside. **"What happened? You taught me everything I know!**

**Maybe so, but I didn't teach you everything I know."**

Again, what's wrong with being the greatest? Is it OK if you can put your money where your mouth is? Or does it take something more, like having your priorities straight.

**"Hey guys I was out of the loop. What were you talking about when we were out on the road?"**

This is my translation of the question Jesus asked in this morning's gospel lesson. **"Hey guys, I was out of the loop."** Isn't that strange? Why wasn't Jesus in the loop? In my mind's eye I see it this way. First, the dusty road cutting through the Galilean countryside, then bunched together, having an animated conversation you can see the twelve disciples, and about thirty paces ahead Jesus is forging on alone to Jerusalem.

What's wrong with this picture? Obviously something happened. At the start of his ministry, just after Jesus had picked the twelve I see them all bunched together with Jesus in the middle explaining his teachings. Sometimes they would listen intently, other times they'd be joking and laughing as the disciples expressed their joy about being part of such a wonderful adventure.

This early period was the sunshine days of Jesus ministry. The crowds were huge and Jesus' popularity was at an all time high. Everybody except the scribes and Pharisees liked what they were hearing and seeing.

The blind and deaf and lame were now seeing, hearing and walking. The people were being told "**The kingdom of God is at hand**" and "**Go in peace your sins are forgiven.**" Everyone sensed a new day was dawning and through Jesus, the future, in their dark and sad world, now promised to be bright and happy.

But that was then and this is now. Several days earlier Jesus took the twelve aside and aside and started talking turkey. He predicted his rejection by the powerful religious establishment and his crucifixion by the Romans. Oh yes, he also promised on the third day he would rise up again, but being stunned by all this death talk, the disciples failed to hear eventually everything would turn out for the best.

So, that's what changed the dynamics of the relationships between Jesus and the disciples. Jesus was the lonely point man, literally and figuratively, as he led his disciples on the road to Jerusalem, they avoided Jesus and lagged behind arguing about, get this, who was to be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

**"What were you arguing about on the road?"** Understandably, they were silent because they were embarrassed by what they said. Can you hear them? **"What do you mean you're more humble than me? How can you say that Peter? Why I have more humility in my pinky than you have in your big oafish body!"**

Not too pretty is it? Especially when they realized, in Jesus' presence, how foolish they sounded. Maybe they realized if you have to brag you're humble, you really aren't very humble and if you promote yourself to greatness, you really aren't so great.

Which now brings me back to the question asked in the sermon title. **"What's so wrong about being the greatest, or at least being the best you can be?"**

Let's begin with this. There is nothing wrong with it. Wanting to achieve and fulfill your potential and being at the top of your game is within God's will. Remember the parable about the three slaves, each given talents according to their abilities? God wants you to risk and stretch yourself as much as you're able. If you remember the parable, Jesus taught the servant who hid his talents in the ground was the only one at fault. The other two were more ambitious with the talents given them and they were rewarded.

So being the greatest at what you do is to be commended. I want my doctor to be the best doctor in town. I want my auto mechanic to be the greatest. You want the best teachers for your children and so on.

That's why I can say without hesitation, striving for greatness is what God expects, as long as you remember to keep your perspective, otherwise you'll look as foolish as that young pool shark, not to mention the twelve disciples.

To help the disciples get their priorities straight Jesus did a curious thing. After saying "**Whoever wants to be first, must be last of all and the servant of all,**" he took a little child in his arms and said to them, "**Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me and also welcomes the one who sent me.**"

In our culture, we're all about the welfare and happiness of our children. This may be hard to comprehend, but in the first century Roman world, children were viewed as property and servants to their elders. So Jesus was teaching a radical lesson. "When you embrace the least important, you embrace me." I'm sure it wasn't lost on the twelve in their Aramaic language the words child and servant are synonymous. If you really want to achieve greatness be prepared to embrace a child, be a servant, put others before yourself and you find your true calling.

So, you can be a disciple, and at the same time strive for greatness as long as you remember in Jesus' eyes, rank and privilege are useless because those who are last in the world are first in the kingdom. So, go ahead, be the greatest you can be, but don't become so driven you forget what's really important in life.

You've heard me say this before, but it really bears repeating today. One hundred years from now know one will care how much money you made, where you lived or what type of car you drove. The only lasting legacy you leave behind will be the affect you have had on your children.

What did Jesus say? "**If you want to be great you must be the servant of all. Whoever welcomes a child in my name welcomes me.**"

That is what Jesus wants you and me to know: Unlearn all the cynical corrupting lessons you learned as an adult. Stop buying into the culture's broken perceptions about greatness and discover as you seek out and serve your neighbor, true greatness will seek and find you.

I haven't said anything especially new and revolutionary this morning. You've all heard this before. You also realize the eternal values of the Kingdom trump the fleeting values of the world. And yes these teachings aren't rocket science. But maybe your stumbling block is not knowing how to apply these teachings in tangible ways to enhance both your humanity and your neighbor's life.

To help, let's review the first petition in our Lord's Prayer: "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Whenever you submit to God's will by following Jesus' example, whenever you go out of your way to help someone God puts in your path, in Jesus' eyes, you're striving for greatness. Whenever you instinctively do something for someone you may instinctively consider "beneath me," you're being Christ

to your neighbor. Whenever you stop someone from paying you undue homage and instead level the playing field so you're equal to each other, then you're doing God's will, here on earth as it's automatically being done up in heaven.

Every day God empowers you to resist the temptation to put others in their place because, after all, you're better than they are. Every day God gives you the chance to be a friend to someone you'd normally not associate with, let alone give two minutes of your time.

Sometimes when I'm tempted not to give myself, my time and my friendship to someone I'd rather not be bothered with, that still small voice whispers, "You're not asked to spend time with him or her, you're being asked to spend your time with me."

What do I say all the time? Christianity is primarily about taking care of your relationships with God and your neighbor. Jesus set the tone in the Upper Room, "I no longer call you my servants, you are my friends."

Sure, strive to be the greatest, the best you can be in your chosen field. But first and foremost become the greatest friend you can be with God and your neighbor.

Maybe Jesus hasn't taught us everything he knows, but let's all hope when you meet Christ face to face as you step into eternity, he'll welcome you saying, "Friend, you're the greatest."