

The Rev. Dennis J. Reid  
 A Sermon for the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B | Mark 9:30-37  
 St. Alban's Church, Sinking Spring, PA  
 September 23rd 2018

In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

There is something very alluring about *greatness*.

The disciples argue about it in our reading today, but I'm sure they're not the only ones. The search for greatness is something that can potentially occupy a lot of our time and energy. We tell of people who are destined for it. It is one of the highest markers of praise we can give -- that someone is great at what they do -- and it's something many strive for, be it greatness in a career, as a spouse or parent, in a sport or hobby, or lots of other places. The idea of achievement and ranking must be important to us -- maybe that's why it's so interesting to hear the disciples talk about this -- to argue over which of them is the greatest. It's kind of relatable, isn't it? In a world where every restaurant, business, school, doctor, and just about everything else is reviewed and ranked, this is almost a conversation people have daily:

"You wanna try that new chinese restaurant?"

"Nah, I hear it's not that great."

Who wants to go to a sub-par restaurant? Who doesn't want the best medical care? Who goes to stores that regularly only receive one out of five stars when you could go to the great store with all five star reviews?

Of course all of this is subjective, and that's part of the myth that surrounds what greatness really is. And because greatness is a matter of opinion, it's not something we can always agree on. After all, what, *exactly*, defines greatness? It may be one of those we-know-it-when-we-see-it kind of things, but I'm not so sure. Can greatness be quantified? How do we know who is the greatest? By what parameters is greatness judged? Will we ever agree on who or what is greatest?

This is, apparently, was the kind of conversation that the disciples were having as they travelled on the road to Capernaum. Perhaps in what started as a benign topic to pass the time on their walk, something must have triggered their emotions into a full-blown argument. Mark's Gospel handles it almost in passing, though, and we don't get all the details. But we do hear Jesus, once they're through with their argument and have arrived at their destination, question them -- "what were you arguing about?" The silence from the disciples is deafening. For as much anger and desire and energy and aspiration that they must have argued with, they can't seem to utter even one word in defense of the topic of their argument. It would seem that the disciples were too ashamed to admit to seeking so much glory for themselves. Perhaps they didn't respond to Jesus because they immediately recognized themselves to be in the wrong -- or, at the very least, to echo our collect today, they were thinking an awful lot on earthly things and not heavenly things.

But if they were indeed ashamed, it is only because they seemed to have related the idea of greatness to their own self-worth -- that if they weren't *great*, it almost didn't matter what they were. That sounds odd to our twenty-first century ears -- our society values greatness, might, strength, ability. But what if that wasn't what was most important in this life? The disciples were about to learn this lesson from Jesus. In fact, he doesn't even comment on greatness. He completely re-orientes their vision to a much different goal, to a way of life that he's been demonstrating to them and that he hopes they pick up on their own, too: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." I imagine this may have come as a bit of a shock to the disciples, and Jesus' language still today makes us confront the notion of how we define what is great and whether or not we should care about it at all.

Interestingly, Jesus doesn't call us to greatness. That may sound wrong, but it's not. Jesus doesn't call us to be great. He calls us to be *our* best, which is when our wills most align with God's, when our self-worth is seen not in what we've accomplished but in how we come to know ourselves as God's beloved, and when in our self-image we see even in the image of God in which we've been made. So at no point does Jesus tell his disciples "follow me and I will make you great." If anything, that's more along the lines of what Satan told Jesus, that he tempted Jesus with the allure of greatness. Instead Jesus often encourages something else besides greatness -- when he tells of God's blessings he does not talk about the rich, the powerful, the important, and the first, but rather the poor, the meek, the lowly, and the last. When he talks about what welcoming him looks like, he puts a child in their midst and says "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." For Jesus to associate his very self with this child was to associate himself with someone worth next to nothing in their society, for that was the worth of children then. Given many opportunities in his life to claim the greatness and the glory that was rightfully his, Jesus did the opposite, not exploiting his Godliness but humbling himself, emptying himself to the greatest shame imaginable, even death upon a cross.

We who follow in the steps of a crucified and humbled Christ are called not to greatness but to serve as he did. Though if we do find ourselves particularly focused on the idea of greatness, it may not be a bad thing. If we cannot define greatness, it may be because we cannot fully define our God -- our God who alone is great, who alone is mighty and worthy of glory, who alone is the subject of our hearts' deepest desires. When we yearn for greatness, we very well may be yearning for God. Because there is indeed something very alluring about the One, God Almighty, who is great.

And unlike when our own conversations of greatness lead to arguments like the disciples' did, there is often little disagreement about what it means to serve. To give. To act for others. To look beyond our own interests. To go the extra mile for someone else. If I ask you who is great, we might argue for hours. If I ask you what it means to serve and be a servant, it will not take us long to agree on what that looks like.

And I hope we do agree. Because as we prepare to enter into our Stewardship Campaign in a couple weeks, we first want to hear from you about this very topic -- what it means to serve, where you would like to serve, and what God's dream is for St. Alban's. This week, we'll put out a link to our email list and our website to a short survey that will ask you to think about how St. Alban's can best use its finances for ministry, outreach, and service in the coming year -- we'll also have the survey available as a bulletin insert next week. We who are asked by God to be good stewards of our resources always have to work to align those resources with God's mission for the Church, and today and everyday, we hear God calling us to be not great but servants of all. So we want to hear from you:

About how we might find new ways to serve, to become last among the people we know, to seek not our own glory but the glory of God.

About where your heart's yearnings are calling you in ministry, mission, and servitude.

About where each of us and, together, we as a parish can best use our finances to live into this calling of being servants for Christ's sake.

May God increase in you the good work of discernment as we move forward here together. May God give us strength to endure the struggle of not seeking greatness for ourselves. And may God, who alone is great, bless you and lead you on the path to follow Christ as a servant, seeking his will for you this day and always.

Amen.