

Sermons at  
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)  
Reggie Denton, Pastor

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

There's an interesting story that came out of World War 2. England and Germany both had state-of-the-art fighter planes. Germany had the Messerschmitt, which was considered to be the world's fastest fighter plane. The British had the Supermarine Spitfire. The Spitfire was slower than the Messerschmitt. Nonetheless, German pilots were envious of their British counterparts.

You see, the Messerschmitt had been designed to hold the perfect German. Who was the perfect German? Who else but Der Fuhrer, Adolf Hitler. Hitler was little more than five feet tall. However, the German pilots who flew the plane were considerably taller than 5 feet. So, the Germans had to fly in very cramped quarters. But who was going to tell Adolf Hitler that he was not the perfect German? The Messerschmitts were faster, but their pilots were LIMITED by the EGO of a man who would NEVER FLY them.

It's an amazing fact, but many leaders fail because of big egos. Big men in little planes. Big egos in little men. As the ancient adage says: "Pride goeth before a fall." And it's true.

In our Gospel today, Jesus tells his disciples for a SECOND time that he's going to Jerusalem, where he will be rejected, beaten, and crucified and, three days later, be raised from the dead. And then, a short time later, as they are walking along, Jesus catches them arguing about who among them was the greatest. The CONTRAST between what Jesus had JUST said about his suffering and death, and the disciples IMMEDIATELY arguing over their power and status, could NOT BE MORE STARK. There is something WAY OUT OF WHACK here.

But hold on. Let's not judge these disciples too quickly. If they took Jesus' words about his death seriously, then a discussion about who would take OVER his ministry afterwards would certainly make sense. But even if that is how the conversation started, it's clear that it had quickly devolved into an ARGUMENT. And THAT is something ELSE ENTIRELY. Arguments are LOUDER, and PERSONAL, and sometimes angry. They argued about who of them was the greatest.

The greatest? What does that even mean? What does it MEAN "to be better" than another person? Our culture has become obsessed with this. We've devised methods to TEST ways of BEING "better." A promotion elevates a person's power in a company. A person's salary determines their status. A footrace can determine the faster runner. Tests can determine who knows more or can do more. Grades are given in school to determine the better students. Contests are held to determine the better athlete -- the better boxer, the better swimmer, the better thrower, the better jumper. The list could go on and on. How many different events are we up to in the Olympics now? And spectator sports have become a multi-billion dollar industry.

When a football player makes a good play, he often comes up pounding his chest, shouting, "I told you! You can't beat me! I'm better than you!"

But does DOING something BETTER than another person make one a better PERSON than the other? Unfortunately, we often SAY or THINK that. We win a contest, so we think, "I'm better than them. Or, more common, we DON'T win the contest, so we think, "I must be no good."

Take, for example, the finals of the Little League World Series. The members of the team who won, and their parents in the stands, were full of joy. The members of the team who came in second, and THEIR parents, were full of tears. They finished ONLY the SECOND-BEST little league team in the ENTIRE WORLD, but we don't LIKE being number 2.

As it turns out, the disciples were a lot like US. We ALL want to know who's the greatest. We want to know who's the BEST at our work, in our community, in our school, even in CHURCH. This is a world of wealth and status, and SOMEBODY'S going to end up on top.

Who DOESN'T want to STAND OUT? Some of the greatest people who have ever lived were also among the most ambitious.

It's said that Michelangelo prayed: "Lord, grant that I may always DESIRE MORE than I can accomplish."

Abraham Lincoln often said to himself as a boy studying by the pine log fire at night: "I will study and get ready, and perhaps my chance will come." And, indeed, it did come.

We ALL have a desire within us to be GREAT. The disciples were human. They wanted their names to be in lights, just as you and I want to stand out from our peers. There's nothing WRONG with that, as long it doesn't cause us to MISTREAT OTHERS or betray our VALUES. Our reading from James called that SELFISH ambition. My guess is that Jesus WANTED them to be ambitious, because AMBITIOUS people GET THINGS DONE. He just wanted them to be ambitious in the RIGHT WAY, not SELFISH ambition.

I'm struck by the fact that Jesus doesn't tell them to NOT STRIVE for greatness. Jesus KNEW that's simply human nature. So instead of criticizing us, Jesus challenges us to RECONSIDER what GREATNESS IS, what greatness LOOKS like, and how to ACHIEVE it.

So, Jesus takes a little CHILD in his arms to SHOW us. He says, "Whoever WELCOMES one such CHILD in my name welcomes ME." According to Jesus, success, or the lack of it, is not the measure of a person. Greatness is found elsewhere. Greatness is lifting up the smallest, serving the lowest, honoring the least. He says, "Whoever wants to be FIRST must be LAST of all and SERVANT of all."

Some years ago, St. Paul School of Theology in Kansas City was seeking a new president. Over one hundred candidates applied for the position. The search committee narrowed the list to five eminently qualified persons. Then somebody came up with a brilliant idea: "Let's send a person to the institutions where each of the five finalists is currently employed, and let's interview the JANITOR at each place, asking him what HE thinks of the man seeking to be our president." This was done and a JANITOR gave such a GLOWING appraisal of William MacElvaney, that he was selected President of the school.

Somebody on that search committee UNDERSTOOD that those who live CLOSE to Christ no longer relate to other people according to rank or power or money or prestige. They treat janitors and governors with equal dignity. They regard EVERYBODY as a brother or sister.

An Amish man was once asked by an enthusiastic young evangelist whether he'd been saved, and whether he had accepted Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior?

The gentleman replied, "Why do you ask ME such a thing? I could tell you anything. Here are the names of my banker, my grocer, and my farm hands. Ask THEM if I've been saved."

We tend to praise people for power, prestige and possessions. We idolize (and yes, I use that word "idol" intentionally) we idolize celebrities, athletes and CEOs, who make 500 times more than us. That's a real number, by the way. The CEO of Kroger, the grocery store conglomerate, made 15.7 million last year, 502 times the AVERAGE employee for that company.

But is a CEO really WORTH 500 times more than a worker? Is a celebrity's opinion, on ANYTHING OUTSIDE their particular profession, really more valuable than ours? Is an athlete who does something better than us really a better PERSON than us?

We attribute great trustworthiness and virtue and righteousness to our idols, that they REALLY HAVEN'T EARNED. And while many of them ARE good people, let's be honest, many of them REALLY AREN'T. Some of them have scratched and clawed and schemed and deceived and manipulated their way to the top. Some, that we consider great in this world, lie, cheat and steal their way to status and riches.

So, like those disciples, arguing about who's the best, something is WAY OUT OF WHACK here. This is NOT the way to MEASURE GREATNESS.

Think about your OWN experience for a moment. Who were the GREATEST people YOU have ever known personally? Did THEY HAVE great power, or prestige, or possessions? Most of us would say "no." Success does not equate to being a good person.

JESUS says, "Whoever wants to be FIRST must be LAST of all and SERVANT of all."

Does that mean that we get extra points with God for serving our neighbors? And double points for being really GOOD at HUMILITY? Of course not. That's just more of the SAME MADNESS.

We serve NOT to make OURSELVES LOOK BETTER, but because we SEE the VALUE in the OTHER person. THEY are WORTH it.

Jesus calls us to SEEK OUT the people that the WORLD would RATHER IGNORE, to LOVE them IN HIS NAME. In HIS name. Because THEIR VALUE WAS NEVER A QUESTION. Because he LOVES them. Because he died for them. He died for ALL of us.

Let's not forget our Lord's FIRST lesson in this reading. "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." Jesus didn't just SAY that; he LIVED it, and DIED FOR it. The first DID become last. Jesus Christ, God's only Son, the GREATEST OF ALL, became LAST – for US.

You see, WE were the children, we were the HELPLESS ones, we were the HOPELESS ones, and Jesus welcomed US. He died for us, to make US, who were LAST of all, and LEAST of all, the FIRST in his kingdom.

"Whoever wants to be FIRST must be LAST of all and SERVANT of all." The GREATEST OF ALL GAVE HIMSELF to others. THAT is what GREATNESS LOOKS like.

May OUR lives look MORE like HIS. Amen.