

The Call to Greatness

This gospel passage is a pretty classic story of Jesus' interactions with his disciples. Jesus tries to explain to them what his ministry is really all about and what that means about how things will end for him. He's crystal clear about having to suffer and die, which, seeing as though they have been run out of multiple towns and barely escaped with their lives on a few occasions should come as no great surprise to any of the twelve. And yet, the disciples seem to understand none of it and ignore him completely. That's the only way it would make sense to fight over who would be the greatest in this context. If they really believed that Jesus would end up on the cross, would they really vie to be his greatest follower? We know that the truth is that they would not because when the time came and Jesus was tried and lifted high on the cross, none of them fought to be by his side. None of them came out of the crowd and said, "I am his greatest follower." They all ran and hid.

But here's the beautiful part of this story: instead of getting frustrated with them like he does some other times, Jesus tries to clarify what he's saying with a stark but simple explanation. If you want to be the greatest, you have to be servant of all. It's that simple. In the economy of God, last is first, least is greatest. Then Jesus takes one of the most gentle approaches to explaining himself to them that we have recorded. He pulls a small child to him from out of the crowd, holds her in his arms, and says, "whoever welcomes one such child welcomes me, and the one who sent me." God's greatness is about the meek, lowly, voiceless, and overlooked. That's where God lives in this world.

The child was not some useful prop that was near at hand. The child was meant to remind them that the power of the gospel was built on human weakness. Jesus is reminding them that God came into the world as a helpless child, to whom no one wanted to give space. No one feared him. No one looked on the Nazarene child and thought of greatness, because by any human standard he did not measure up. And yet he was good news incarnate, the embodiment of God's loving plan for healing the world and disrupting the human order of things. Jesus is telling his disciples, then and now, that only those who can recognize the importance of a lowly child, only those who can make space for one such as him, can have the God who sent him indwelling and enlivening.

It would be easy to judge the disciples harshly, but it would be disingenuous. We know the full story of the gospel better than any of them did, and yet we still don't get it. We want to be followers of Jesus. I presume that is why we all get up and come here to engage in worship each Sunday. But we also want to be the greatest, just like them. And when it comes right down to it most of us would rather be thought of as great by the standards of the world around us rather than great in that paradoxical last and "servant of all" way Jesus is talking about. Maybe it's just me and I'm projecting here, but I somehow doubt it.

We have an infatuation with greatness. Look at our political world, our business culture, our social circles - the drive to be the greatest is all-consuming, by which I mean we often really let everything else - our family life, personal health, real happiness, social responsibility - be eaten up as fuel for the fire in the march to the top. Whatever it takes to reach the mythical plateau of greatness. We want to be the best as measured by the society's standards. If there is a vacuum at the top there is guaranteed to be fighting to fill the empty space. But on the other hand, if there are openings for servants we generally think someone else will fill those slots.

Worse yet we, feed this addiction to our children and we encourage it in each other, spurring a vicious cycle that makes the greatness all the more unattainable, and therefore rare, prestigious, and alluring. It is a poison that splits disciples, and calls us away from following Jesus. But what if we actually bought into the idea of greatness in the kingdom-of-God-sense as servant of all. There would surely be room for all of us, and more importantly we would find Jesus invited into our midst. But what does it really mean practically, and how would we get there?

First, I think it starts not by doing something, but by being something. Servant of all is not a specific, prescribed task, but rather a manner of being - a mindset of being willing to care for others. It is hard in our culture that measures things by what is done and accomplished to start a journey without a set of tasks, but what Jesus calls us to is a mindset change first and foremost. Are you willing to see things differently, to measure greatness by another standard, to be thought of as servant of all?

The Reverend Stephen Lewis calls this "an insignificant greatness," by which he means a type of greatness that no one will remark on, that will not make you famous, that will not likely be recorded in the history books. He is not saying throw away your talents and resources. You are called to use all that God has given and made you to be to the best of your abilities. But he is saying that it will not ultimately be about you. It is a greatness that points not to yourself but the God who sent you, who gives you being and meaning. It is a greatness that signifies that you are seeing the world through the lens of the gospel, through the eyes of the God who came into the world as a lowly child, a virtual outcast, and used that status to lift others into the presence of the most high God.

Beyond the change of mindset to a willingness to be a great servant, we must also begin by making space in the very center of our communal life for the least, for a nameless child who resembles the lowly babe of Bethlehem, for one with no power or privilege. It is a willingness to let the need of the one at the center decide what service is needed and what greatness would be in that circumstance, which seems on the surface scattered, unplanned, and profoundly disempowering, and yet how many of the most memorable stories in the gospel revolve around Jesus' journey being hijacked by the need with which he is confronted in the moment - by the mute in need of healing, the sinner in need of forgiving, the questioner in need of teaching. These are the very stories we think made Jesus great, but they were governed not by his agenda but by his service to the need that arose. His ministry was simply responding to the least in his presence.

We need to be constantly reminded of the gospel so that the story becomes stronger than society's narrative of greatness. We need to let God's values seep into our being. We must teach our children, we must teach each other, we must let God teach us to see the world through Jesus eyes. Only then can we teach our neighbors and our community. Only then will we see the kingdom of Christ surface among us. We will have to rethink what education and formation looks like in light of this calling of Jesus. It is an invitation to discern what habits cultivate the capacity for this greatness. We will have to practice welcome Christ and the one who sent him into our midst on a regular basis. But that is what makes this paradigm shift all worth it - the prospect of having God among us.

We must re-imagine the call to greatness as a church in our new diocese, as a parish in our town, as servants in the spheres of our own life. We can't change the world by making Jesus message conform to the very measures the world is already using. If we want to be transformative agents of God's peace and healing in the world, in other words, if we want to be disciples of Christ, then we must be willing to wade into this challenge to see greatness and servanthood as overlapping categories. Can we muster the courage to live into that challenge?