

Who is the Greatest?
18th Sunday after Pentecost - Year B
Psalm Reading: (1)
NT: Proverbs (31:10-31), Mark (9:30-37)

So, who is the greatest? Well, I suppose determining the greatest first depends on your definition, and who is doing the defining. When I was a kid, my Dad would watch boxing on TV in the evenings and since there was only one TV we all watched what my Dad wanted to watch. And he always had to have one of us kids in the room. Back in the day, there was no such thing as a remote and he would need one of us to hang out close to the TV so we could change the channel or adjust the volume or the aerial, or the horizontal or vertical hold as the need arose. In case there was an inflexible problem, he saved banging on the side of the TV for himself. He knew just where to tap it.

So, when I was a boy, I knew quite a bit about boxing. Who was fighting whom, and how truly bad the judging was. And I also knew who the greatest boxer in the world was. There was no doubt about the fact, because this pugilist was not shy about telling us about his various abilities. He could “float like a butterfly and sting like a bee.” He could do the shuffle. He could do the rop-a-dope. And every chance he got, he got in front of the TV camera and announced to the world that he was the “greatest”. And as full of himself as Mohamed Ali could seem, we knew two things about him. He seemed larger than life, and more importantly, he really was the greatest fighter the world had ever seen.¹

But, you know, Ali suffered for his art, if you can call boxing an art, and if it is, it is a brutal one. Ali suffered many injuries during his boxing career and many think it caused him permanent damage possibly contributing to his death.² Ali's worldly success, while he was at the height of his career, is what many think of as being great, but this is only a kind of fleeting greatness. There is another kind of greatness...

In our reading from Mark, Jesus and his disciples are passing through Galilee. (NIV, Mark 9:30) They are taking a circuitous route because Jesus wants time alone with his disciples so that he can teach them privately. (v.31) This actually makes a lot of sense. In the Gospel of Mark, up to this point, the disciples have not displayed much in the way of understanding. If you will recall from last week's sermon, the disciples had totally misunderstood the concept of the Messiah and how Jesus fit into the prophecy from the Old Testament, derived largely from Isaiah and the Psalms.

So, Jesus tells them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men." He had told them this before, and they'd had a hard time understanding it then. He had also told them that these men "will kill him, and after three days he will rise." (v.31) Yes, this is a hard saying, but you get the feeling that Jesus is getting a little frustrated with the disciples' inability to get this into their heads. Honestly, the disciples are not all that quick on the uptake in the Gospel of Mark. They seldom seem to know what is truly going on. You can understand why if you realize that at least two of these fellows were men whose philosophic bent was toward rebellion against Rome. We have Judas, and of course, Simon the Zealot. The zealots were strict

adherents of the law and were gung-ho to take on Rome.³ There must have been a great deal of resistance in the group to what Jesus was trying to tell them - that he was not the kind of Messiah they supposed. After this second time Jesus tells them he is going to die at the hands of humans, he adds in the very strange and confusing prediction that “after three days he will rise.” (v.31)

This rising thing, this is something that is foreign to the disciples. Since they do not know what to make of it, they do not make anything of it. The Gospel tells us, “But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.” So, they start to make assumptions on their own. They start muttering to themselves on the road. I can just see them letting Jesus move on ahead while they hang back, all of them thinking they are talking low enough that Jesus cannot hear them. (v.32)

So, finally, they come to Capernaum, and you can just feel the tension between Jesus and the disciples. They are all walking around with their lips pursed and occasionally looking askance at Jesus, wanting Jesus to understand that there is a problem, but at the same time not wanting to come out and say so. Now, Capernaum, as you might know, is situated on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee, and it was a kind of base of operations for Jesus through most of his ministry. We may assume that Jesus and the disciples stayed in the house of Peter and Andrew⁴ as they had on previous occasions, but really we do not know whose house it was.

So, the tension is thick in the air and finally Jesus asks the question that is just hanging there, “What were you arguing about on the road?” (v.33) But the response to this is, as you

might expect, total silence from the Apostles because what they were arguing about did not do credit to them and might even be construed as a loss of faith in Jesus. What they had been arguing about among themselves on that journey was who among them was the greatest.” (v.34)

This does not look good on them, first because it shows them to be the vain and self-interested individuals that we as humans all can be. We all want others to think highly of us. This is a fundamental need of the human psyche.

Second, by ranking themselves, it shows that they are trying to advance themselves within the Apostolic structure. If they are still thinking of themselves as members of this team that is assisting the Messiah to fulfill his destiny, then the higher up they are in the chain of command, the more power and glory it would mean for them in the long run.

But what if it means something more! The way Jesus is talking he seems bent on destruction. He is talking about being turned over to human powers and being killed! If that is the case, then someone must take over control of the Jesus movement. Who should that be? In essence they are talking about Jesus as if he is already gone. And though his successor might not be so charismatic, might not be the actual Messiah, this “greatest” apostle, would have significant political and personal power.

Now being the greatest for the Apostles is looking more and more like the worldly definition of being great. It involves political power that can be translated into earthly wealth. It involves the adulation of the people. It involves commanding the rest of the Apostles, the disciples, and the crowds that are

associated with Jesus. It appears to be a power and status thing.

Although the Apostles decline to say what they have been talking about on the road, Jesus knows. Perhaps he heard snatches as they walked along the dusty road or perhaps it is his prescient understanding of human nature, or maybe he understands it because of his omniscient Godly power. So Jesus calls the Twelve together in one room then he sits and tells them, “Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.” (v.35)

This must have floored the Apostles, because they can suddenly see that Jesus does know exactly what they had been talking about, who was first among them. They have been found out by the master. This comment must confuse them because it completely turns all of their perceptions on their heads. They find out that what it means to be the greatest is not what they think it means. It is not a matter of power. It is a matter of how we act toward our fellow humans. It means that the more we work to help one another, the greater we are. The better servants we are to one another, the greater we are in the eyes of God.

This is truly backward from expectations for the Apostles, especially in a time when status was at least partially dependent on how many people were your servants or slaves. And to punctuate this point. Jesus shows them a child and says to them, (v.36) “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.” (v.37)

Now, we must remember that in that day and age children were not highly considered in general. So to welcome a child was something that was little thought of. What Jesus is saying is that if you treat someone with little or no social status with some respect, then you are showing respect to Jesus. And he is saying that if you welcome him, you also welcome the one who sent him. This means that just as Jesus is a direct connection to God, by extension to welcome the most disadvantaged person is also to welcome God into your life.

This connection between the least among us with God is one of the things that makes the last first and the first last. As Jesus says, we must become servants to one another, we must become servants of all. This includes becoming better at what we do. Remember Mohamed Ali, one of the greatest boxers of all time? Yes, he had natural talent, but to become a great boxer. He had to train. He had to engage others. He had to work hard.

For us to become great servants we must practice being great servants, doing our best to help others when the opportunity arises. We must read God's word to give us direction. In the last few days I have come to the conclusion that it is also fundamental to becoming a good servants that we let ourselves be vulnerable. As difficult as it is to do, and let me tell you, it will wrench your heart, we become great servants by exposing our feelings to the human condition, opening our hearts to those who suffer in this world because it is those who suffer who are closest to God. When we care for the suffering we get just a little closer to the divine.

As you might guess, I have left for the end of the sermon the answer to the question, “Who is the greatest?” Well, I know it will be no surprise to you all to hear me say that it is not me and it is not you. It is none of us here in this Sanctuary. It is, rather, the one who actually is the servant who laid down his life so that we all might live. The one who suffered and died on the cross, taking on our manifold sins so that we might be forgiven. Yes, the greatest of all is the servant of all. It is Jesus Christ.

Please bow your heads and pray with me...

Eternal God, in our hearts we want to be your servant. It can be a struggle to overcome our egos so that we accept not only the disadvantaged, but also those who work to help others in ways that are different from our own. Lord, fill our hearts with the strength of your spirit. Fill our souls with a desire for you, and fill our minds with fresh ideas so that we might better work to bring your kingdom into the world.

ἀμήν

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<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/sports/muhammad-ali-greatest-all-time-dead-74-n584776>

(accessed September 20, 2018)

2

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muhammad_Ali (accessed September 19, 2018)

3

<https://amazingbibletimeline.com/blog/simon-zealot-apostle/> (accessed September 19, 2018)

4

NIB, Vol. 8, 636.