

Theme: Who Is the Greatest
Text: James 3:16-4:6; Mark 9:30-37
Scripture: “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”

It’s amazing how quickly we humans tend to compare and compete with one another in order to feel a sense of greatness. Which is the best key (*from the Children’s Sermon*) can quickly change into “who is the best?” or “who is the greatest?” It’s all too easy to fall into the trap of trying to determine who is the best or the greatest and we usually do that by using some **human standard!** And that trap is at the core of today’s gospel reading from Mark.

In today’s reading from Mark, chapter 9, Jesus is teaching his disciples about his impending passion and death. This is the second time in Mark’s gospel in which Jesus tells his disciples that he will be betrayed, killed, and then rise. We heard the first prediction in last week’s gospel reading, Mark chapter 8, after which Peter begins to rebuke Jesus for saying such things. Peter and the other disciples didn’t “get it” the first time and the disciples don’t get it this second time either. Though Jesus has been quite clear that his own future will involve suffering and the supreme act of sacrifice in service to others, the disciples spend the rest of the day sauntering down the road arguing among themselves about which of them is the greatest?

We don’t know the substance of their debate. Most sermons I’ve heard on this text (including my own) usually focus on the disciples desire to seek status or political power: who would become Secretary of State in the earthly kingdom they hope Jesus is about to establish. But there are many directions that arguments over greatness can follow. In our culture, we sometimes argue over who is the greatest athlete. In education we argue over who has the highest IQ or the most “smarts.” What about business? Don’t we usually consider the person with the most wealth to be the greatest? And in the political arena, we argue over which party has the greatest platform and the best programs. Even in our own personal spiritual lives we tend to create criteria to evaluate our own greatness compared to others – we judge on who can quote the most bible verses, or seems to have the deepest prayer life. We sometimes even wonder who Jesus might love most.” And there are all sorts of things around which arguments over greatness emerge in the institutional church: Who has the best theology? Who is the most biblically correct? Who has the best plan for mission and ministry? Who are the greatest parish leaders?

One of the problems with such discussions is that they inevitably lead to conflict as it did with the disciples. It’s too bad these disciples didn’t have a copy of James’ epistle, which we’ve heard read this morning. James asks the question: *Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from?* (4:1) Then James answers his own question: “*Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?*”

Though we don’t know the exact substance of the disciples’ argument, we do know that when Jesus confronts them, they go silent. I suspect a lot of us would also become silent if Jesus were to confront us with what we sometimes talk and fret about. To quote one author: “*Some of us spend a lot of time worrying about our status, trying to get the symbols of prestige, and seeking to maneuver so that we get the acclaim.*”¹

¹Adams, Harry S. *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 4, Eds. David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville KY, 2009) 94.

I wonder how long Jesus let the silence continue before he finally said: *Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all?* And then to make his point, he takes a child up into his arms 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.”*

Jesus’ use of a child is an interesting object lesson that we can easily miss in today’s world. In our culture, children often have considerable power – just consider the number of advertizing dollars expended on PR to children. But in the Greco-Roman world of Jesus’ day children had no power; children were regarded as non-persons, or not-yet persons. A child was considered a piece of property belonging to its father and not fit to be out in social situations. So when Jesus places a child in the midst of the disciples, he’s not asking them to ooh and ahh at a cuddly, lovable creature. He’s holding up this child precisely because the child is weak, helpless, and vulnerable. Jesus seems to be teaching that true greatness is discovered in acts of kindness toward those who are most vulnerable – to those who can in no way repay our efforts.

There is a story² that has floated around the internet for several years and is even now available on U-tube. Many of you may have heard this story, but a good story is always worth re-telling, particularly a TRUE story which this is reputed to be. In Brooklyn, New York, there is a school called “Chush” – that’s C-H-U-S-H – that caters to learning disabled children. Some children remain in Chush for their entire school career, while others can be mainstreamed into conventional schools.

At a Chush fund-raising dinner, the father of a Chush child delivered an address that would never be forgotten by those who attended. After extolling the school and its dedicated staff, this father cried out:

"Where is the perfection in my son Shaya? Everything God does is done with perfection. But my child cannot understand things as other children do. My child cannot remember facts and figures as other children do. Where is God's perfection?"

The audience was shocked by the question, pained by the father's anguish, and stilled by the piercing query. But then the father went on:

"I believe that when God brings a child like this into the world, the perfection that he seeks is in the way people react to this child."

He then told the following story about his son Shaya:

One afternoon Shaya and his father walked past a park where some boys Shaya knew were playing baseball. Shaya asked, "Do you think they will let me play?" Shaya's father knew that his son was not at all athletic and that most boys would not want him on their team. But Shaya's father understood that if his son was allowed to play it would give him a sense of belonging.

Shaya's father approached one of the boys in the field and asked if Shaya could play. The boy looked around for guidance from his teammates. Getting none, he took matters into his own hands and said, "We are losing by six runs and the game is in the eighth inning. I guess he can be on our team and we'll try to put him up to bat in the ninth inning." Shaya's father was ecstatic as Shaya smiled broadly. Shaya was told to put on a glove and go out to play short center field.

²<http://placeofpersistence.com/where-is-gods-perfection-the-story-of-shaya/>

In the bottom of the eighth inning, Shaya's team scored a few runs but was still behind by three. In the bottom of the ninth inning, Shaya's team scored again and now with two outs and the bases loaded with the potential winning run on base, Shaya was scheduled to be up. Would the team actually let Shaya bat at this juncture and give away their chance to win the game?

Surprisingly, Shaya was given the bat. Everyone knew that it was all but impossible because Shaya didn't even know how to hold the bat properly, let alone hit with it. However as Shaya stepped up to the plate, the pitcher moved a few steps closer to lob the ball in softly so Shaya should at least be able to make contact.

The first pitch came in and Shaya swung clumsily and missed. One of Shaya's teammates came up to Shaya and together they held the bat and faced the pitcher waiting for the next pitch. The pitcher again took a few steps forward to toss the ball even more softly toward Shaya. As the pitch came in, Shaya and his teammate swung at the bat and together they hit a slow ground ball to the pitcher. The pitcher picked up the soft grounder and could easily have thrown the ball to the first baseman. Shaya would have been out and that would have ended the game.

Instead, the pitcher took the ball and threw it on a high arc to right field, far beyond reach of the first baseman. Everyone started yelling, "Shaya, run to first. Run to first." Never in his life had Shaya run to first. He scampered down the baseline wide-eyed and startled.

By the time he reached first base, the right fielder had the ball. He could have thrown the ball to the second baseman who would tag out Shaya, who was still running. But the right fielder intentionally threw the ball high and far over the third baseman's head. Everyone yelled, "Run to second, run to second." Shaya ran towards second base as the runners ahead of him deliriously circled the bases towards home.

As Shaya reached second base, the opposing short stop ran to him, turned him in the direction of third base and shouted, "Run to third." As Shaya rounded third, the boys from both teams ran behind him screaming, "Shaya run home."

Shaya ran home, stepped on home plate and all 18 boys lifted him on their shoulders and made him the hero, as he had just hit a "grand slam" and won the game for his team.

After sharing this story, the father concluded by saying softly: "That day those 18 boys reached their level of God's perfection." But in light of today's gospel, I think Jesus would have said: ***"That day those 18 boys became truly great in God's eyes."***

This week God will likely place someone in each of our paths who is among the vulnerable. As you and I make choices about how to respond as a disciple of Jesus Christ, remember: Jesus measures greatness in terms of service – NOT by any of the common standards by which our culture usually measure greatness. For Jesus said: ***"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."***

Amen.