

17th Sunday after Pentecost
September 19, 2021
Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church
Mark 9:30-37
True Greatness

Mark 9:30–37 (NIV84)

They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, ³¹ because he was teaching his disciples. He said to them, “The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.” ³² But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it. ³³ They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the road?” ³⁴ But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. ³⁵ Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, “If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.” ³⁶ He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ “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.”

Dear Friends in Christ,

A goat is an animal similar in size to sheep. The word GOAT is also used as an acronym for Greatest Of All Time. So who is the GOAT in football? Messi or Renaldo or Pele? Or were you thinking of American football? Maybe people pick someone like Walter Payton, Joe Montana or Tom Brady as the greatest of all time. You might think of someone like Babe Ruth in baseball or Michael Phelps in swimming. Of course there are many disagreements about who is the GOAT for a particular sport. People look at the athlete's personal records, team records, championships, gold medals, world records, MVP awards and so on. The arguments can become intense as one argues for an athlete of the past and another for a contemporary athlete. Similar discussions/arguments happen over the GOAT of actors or musicians or singers.

Although much of our time and money in this country is spent on sports and entertainment, we know deep down that greatness is not really about championships and awards. Greatness was shown by those who ran into burning buildings twenty years ago in New York. I don't think you will find many to disagree with that statement. We recognize that those who run into danger in order to save others are great. But we don't even know their names. Their names may appear in news stories or be etched into a monument, but most of us will not remember or recognize the names of such great heroes. We too quickly turn our attention back to the famous athletes and entertainers. Jesus said it would be like this.

He teaches his disciples about true greatness. It is not about awards or records. Instead true greatness sacrifices for others and serves others without seeking to be recognized as the GOAT.

Sacrifices

They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, ³¹ because he was teaching his disciples. He said to them, “The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.” ³² But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.

Mark tells us in the first verse of his Gospel that he wants to show us that Jesus is the Son of God. He does so by going from one miracle to the next. Jesus heals diseases, feeds thousands and raises the dead. And in what we now have as chapter 9, Mark describes what happened when Peter, James and John went up a mountain with Jesus. Jesus was transfigured so that the glory of God shone from him. They saw Jesus in his glory as the Son of God from all eternity. All of this leads us to conclude that Jesus is the GOAT, the greatest of all time. No other human taught like Jesus. No one performed miracles like Jesus did. No other human is also the Son of God. There can be no discussion or argument. Jesus Christ is and always will be the greatest of all time.

It is not surprising that the disciples would have trouble understanding what Jesus teaches in the verses from Mark 9 today. At the beginning of the chapter, Jesus shows his glory. At the end of the chapter, Jesus tells his disciples that he will be betrayed and killed. How can Jesus, who knows everything, be betrayed? Isn't he smart enough to avoid such a trap? How can the Son of God who stops storms and raises the dead, be killed by ordinary humans? Doesn't Jesus have the power to defend himself? The greatest of all time should not suffer in this way and should certainly not die. What good is it if the greatest of all time dies?

They had questions, but they were afraid to ask Jesus. Since they next began to argue about which of them is the greatest, it is possible that none of them wanted to be seen as weak by the others. They wanted to keep up their appearances as being the best disciple. After all, only a weak and helpless disciple would ask Jesus to explain these things. So no one asked, even though none of them understood.

Jesus kept on teaching them. The type of verb used for teaching here means that Jesus did not just tell them this one time. He was teaching them all along their journey. Mark only records the summary of all Jesus said. *"The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise."*

True greatness sacrifices for others. Jesus was soon to sacrifice himself for the world. His sacrifice on the cross would pay for the sins of all the world. And consider the debt he paid. It was the greatest debt of all time. The national debt is just pennies compared to the debt of even one sin. For one sin separates the sinner from God for all of eternity. One sin earns the sentence of eternal death in hell. And we have all sinned every day of our lives. And so has everyone else in this world. That is the greatest (as in biggest) debt of all time. Therefore, it would take the greatest payment of all time from the greatest of all time to pay this price in full. Christ's sacrifice is worth more than enough to pay this price because he is the greatest of all time – the holy, perfect, eternal Son of God.

True greatness is found in Christ and his sacrifice for the world.

Serves

While Jesus taught about sacrifice, his sacrifice for them, the disciples' selfish sinful nature led them to argue with each other.

They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?" ³⁴ *But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.*

True greatness is sacrifice and service for others, but all the disciples cared about on that walk was figuring out who was the greatest disciple of all time. Peter, James and John got to see Jesus transfigured and be there when Jesus raised Jairus' daughter to life. Perhaps they were the greatest. Andrew was the first to follow Jesus. Matthew gave up his good paying job as a tax collector to follow Jesus. They were not thinking about how to serve each other. They were not taking Jesus' lessons to

heart. They saw the glory and honor to be had for themselves by being named the greatest of the disciples.

It happens to us too. Grown siblings may argue about who helped take care of grandparents or parents who needed almost full time care. The one who helped a lot may want the recognition as the favorite child or the monetary recognition by receiving more of the inheritance. Spouses may keep track of who did the most household chores as a way to get the upper hand in the home. Someone may think they are more valuable to the family because they bring home the biggest paycheck. If there is a way to make myself look better and greater than someone else, my sinful nature will find it. And too often we want the reward and recognition of being the greatest.

How ironic that those who seek to be great are never truly great according to Jesus.

Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all." ³⁶ He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ "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."

Those who are great in Jesus' eyes are those who are last and those who serve. My friends, Jesus has forgive all the times we put ourselves ahead of others. He has removed the guilt of all our selfishness and desires to be considered the greatest. Because Jesus was willing to be the servant of all and give his holy precious blood for all of us, we too can be servants of all. Jesus uses the example of serving a little child. There are not many awards given for staying up all night with a sick child but this is true greatness according to Jesus. You won't be nominated for MVP for changing a diaper or a thousand, but this is true greatness. Not many will notice the little things we do to serve the children and adults in our life, but Jesus does. For when we serve others in any way without doing it for a reward, we are telling our Savior that we understand and thank him for his truly great service to us.

Jesus is the greatest of all time since he is the eternal and all powerful Son of God. Jesus is also greatest servant of all time, giving his life as the ransom for all sinners. For us to achieve true greatness, we must give up the pursuit of greatness. It is ironic. Give up greatness and pursue service to be truly great in the kingdom of God.

Amen.