

Pentecost 17B 19 September 2021
Mark 9:30-37
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
Greg Bensted

Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

[Jesus] sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Let's pray:

Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all. Not where I come from. Gladstone was a small coastal town that rapidly expanded into an industrial city with a deep-water port. When most people found it difficult to get their head around the concept of millions of dollars, I grew up alongside global industries worth billions. The last project completed there came with a price tag of sixty-three billion dollars! That sort of environment is controlled by a heavily top-down structure, where many people vie to be "top dog" so to speak. *Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.* Sure, we hear this verse in church and even nod in agreement, but then Monday comes along.

Monday greatness is about being number one, a winner, a success. It's about power, control, wealth, fame, reputation, status, and position. Have you ever seen the losing AFL team jumping around on Monday morning fist pumping and shouting, "We're number two, we're number two?" Could you ever imagine a political campaign about making Australia last or a servant of all other countries? And who wants to be the servant of all anyway? That's for the poor, uneducated, backpackers and foreigners, whom we can exploit. Please don't think that's my attitude, I'm simply reporting what I observe, to make a point. Being last and servant of all is not what we usually strive for. It's not the greatness we hope for or aspire to.

If being great or being number one means being last of all and servant of all, then we simply don't understand what greatness is really about. And the disciples don't understand greatness any more than we do.

“What were you arguing about on the way?” Jesus asks his disciples. ‘But they were silent for they had argued with one another who was the greatest.’ Jesus didn’t get an answer to his question. It was met with silence; the silence of being caught out. Jesus isn’t asking for his sake but for theirs. He already knew what the disciples were arguing about.

It’s interesting to note how the story progresses. The disciples were arguing on a public road, out in the open. However, Jesus’ waits for the privacy and confines of the interior of a house to ask his question. There’s a lot more going on here than a simple change of location. Jesus moves the conversation inward. Jesus doesn’t expect an answer, rather, he invites the disciples into deep, self-reflection on what it means to be great and then presents them with an image of true greatness.

Jesus isn’t saying that we shouldn’t or can’t be great. Rather, he asks us to reframe our understanding of greatness.

The question for us then, is: What does it mean and look like for you and me to be great in today’s world?

Jesus answers the question by taking a little child in his arms and saying to the disciples, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

Jesus isn’t saying that greatness is linked to being a child and he doesn’t say that greatness is in being childlike. Greatness is in welcoming one such or such-like a child.

That doesn’t sound too difficult or challenging. Who wouldn’t welcome a little child? But Jesus isn’t talking about the child. He’s talking about what little children represent. In today’s culture, it can be difficult to understand what Jesus is talking about because children and childhood today are romanticised and sentimentalised, whereas, at the time of Jesus, they were paid scant attention.

Jesus is using the child as a symbol for something else. The child is a symbol of vulnerability, powerlessness, and dependency. Children in Jesus’ day had no rights, no status, no economic value. Greatness, Jesus says, is in accepting, serving, helping, and welcoming into our arms anyone like this, regardless of his or her age, beliefs, ethnic background, or position in life.

Greatness isn't found in what we've accomplished and gained for ourselves but in what we've done and given to "the least of these" (Matthew 25:40): the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, and imprisoned; the symbolic children we're well aware exist. Think about family members, nurses, or aged care workers who bathe, change, and care for the elderly, the sick, the dying; they're examples of greatness. When I think of historical figures who exemplify true greatness, I don't think of kings or queens, famous sports players, musicians, artists or people who've achieved material success in business. I think of people like Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa, Florence Nightingale, Wole Soyinka, soldiers, and others who've either suffered or served selflessly out of their compassion for others; they are great people.

Greatness isn't something to be found in those who adopt a posture of superiority over others. It's not about me, my nation, my tribe, my people, my religion, my politics, my bank account, my house, my job, my accomplishments, my reputation, my status. Our greatness is revealed in our service and care of others regardless of their ability or willingness to pay, repay, or return the favour.

When Jesus talked about loving others even when they don't love you (Luke 6:32), doing good to those who don't do good to you (Luke 6:33), lending without expecting to be repaid (Luke 6:34), and inviting to a feast those who can't afford to extend you an invitation in return (Luke 14:12-14), he was describing greatness.

Greatness is revealed when we share with others who have nothing to share with us. Think of the young boy who shared his five loaves and two fish with 5000 people who contributed nothing but their hunger (John 6:9). That boy was great. And as I reflect on the last 6 weeks, I am humbled by the display of greatness from this congregation, reaching out to people in desperate need, digging deep and giving food, time, money and shelter with nary a flinch to calculate the personal cost. Disciples of Jesus show true greatness when it counts and hurts most.

And possibly the toughest cud to chew is when we forgive another person who has neither asked for our forgiveness nor changed his or her behaviour. Those who refuse to carry bitterness or envy toward others are truly great.

When we respond to the needs of others, when we refuse thoughts and actions of hatred or prejudice then greatness comes. Our refusal to objectify the opposite sex or to join in jokes about minorities or foreigners is an act of greatness. When we overcome fear, tear down walls, and make room for those who are different, vulnerable, in need, then we are great. When we work busily but quietly in the background and are barely noticed, then we are also great.

Greatness isn't something to be achieved or earned. It's a quality that arises within and flows from us when our lives are lock-in-step with Jesus and we're walking by faith and not by sight. That's the way Jesus encourages us to live. That's the life I want to live. I want to be great! What about you? True greatness happens in the simple, ordinary, everyday encounters of life. It may go unnoticed and unnamed by the world, but God sees it and smiles.

Friends, you know what day tomorrow is, don't you? It's Monday. Jesus will again set Monday's child before us. And Monday greatness will tempt and call us. But we need not be reluctant because we've been called to greatness by true greatness, the greatness of the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the greatness of the Servant of all, Jesus.

I wonder who the child will be, the child Jesus will set before us.

“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”

Let me know how your Monday goes. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.