

Who's the Greatest?

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Mark 9:30-37

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Glen Ridge Congregational Church

This morning we hear Jesus teaching his disciples what it means to be greatest and first of all. His answer is simple: to be first is to be last and to serve. It is to welcome the child in front of us and inside of us. It is to reclaim our simplicity and humility – to help others and to simply be ourselves. That is what makes us great!

Maurine Mugleston remembers the time she stood at rink side watching a hockey game. One of the players rammed into the board and was immediately crushed by two burley men from the other team, each lashing out for the puck. When they bounced off him, the first player wobbled on his skates and then slid to the ice, knocking his head. Pushing himself up, his nose dripping blood, he saw Maurine standing there. "There must be an easier way to make a living," he roared to her.

"I'll trade jobs!" she shouted back.

"What do you do?"

"I teach sixth grade," she replied.

"Forget it!" he said, and was gone.

The disciples were arguing about who was the greatest: who was the most spiritual, the best teacher, the best healer, the strongest and superior. When Jesus asks them what they were talking about as they walked, they didn't answer; they were ashamed, suddenly found out for their egotism and their pride. Finally, they admitted it was about who's the best.

Our culture is fascinated with the greatest – the most famous, most entertaining, the richest, the most beautiful. And especially we want to argue about and prove who is right, who has the best counter argument, the slickest put-down, best way to cancel your opponent. This is especially top of mind as we get close to the election in November. Candidates claim to be the greatest leaders and try to prove it. They have whole teams and millions of dollars to back them up. We are trained to believe that this is normal, the way people always behave. And then our media becomes more like the Worldwide Wrestling Federation than news outlets, and they act more like cage fighters than reasonable commentators.

Both parties make their positions less about negotiating and more about dictating, more about dominating than explaining – and those who waver from their positions are treated like traitors or heretics and get thrown out.

This also certainly happens in religious circles, with many staking out their positions with vehemence, insisting that God is backing them up and anyone who disagrees is going to hell. That's tough to argue with. You may have seen that Pope Francis just got into hot water recently by saying that other religions are *"like different languages in order to arrive at God, but God is God for all. And if God is God for all, then we are all sons and daughters of God."* Many saw that as abdicating his faith, refusing to assert that the Catholic faith is greatest and right and better than any other. Heresy! But wait, his statement is not different from what other popes (and Jesus) have said about all of God's children being loved and valued by God – and that each person – even non-Christians – can find blessing and salvation by becoming like Christ – even if not by name. Too many people treat religion like a wrestling match rather than an avenue for healing, forgiveness and self-giving love. We forget that the fruits of the spirit are not about being right, but rather: *"love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."* (Gal 5:22-23) Our own UCC tradition affirms "freedom of conscience and private judgement" not literalism or heresy.

Who is the greatest? I find myself wondering about that myself. I've past the seven-decade mark, and I've started to wonder about what I've achieved. I don't have

much to put on a resume – a few achievements that looked good when I was young, but now don't seem so great. I haven't written a book or gotten a PhD or become a talk show host or Tik-Tok influencer. I've been very blessed to have the privilege of being a minister for 42 years, serving one church for 27 years, and that has been a tremendous reward. I am equally blessed to be a husband and a father, and I know I could not have done what I've done without my family, especially Martha. But when it comes to a "Who's Who" who am I? At this point I don't really care.

Who is the greatest? The danger is that some people run after fame and building their resume, but you wonder what they've had to give up to get all the titles at the end of their name. Who have they stepped on to climb up to where they are? Mary Webb wrote this in her book Precious Bane in 1924: *"When folk tell me of this great man and that great man, I think to myself, 'Who was stinted of joy for his glory? How many old folk and children did his coach wheels go over? What bride lacked his song, and what mourner his tears, that he found time to climb so high?'"*

The Roman civilization of Jesus' day was highly stratified, with Roman citizens on top, those who were conquered on the bottom, most of whom were slaves. Most were desperately poor and squeezed tighter and tighter by crushing Roman taxes, with many losing land and livelihood. Children were expendable and invisible. Women, the poor, the handicapped, and foreigners were without power or prestige. So, it was not remarkable that the disciples would want to work their way up the ladder of success. But Jesus and the early Christian community offered an alternative way: a community of equality and compassion, where women and slaves were valued leaders and teachers, where children were protected, where people shared what they had, and offered forgiveness instead of revenge. That was scandalous to many Romans – and emperors sought to stamp them out. Jesus and the church counter the wisdom of the world with the wisdom of God – a better path is possible, and peace and non-violent change can transform this world into a mirror of heaven.

Jesus turns the tables on the disciples. Instead of holding up an example of a saint, a ruler, warrior, or a powerful prophet as a sign of success, he places a little child in the center of the circle, saying: *"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."* Jesus calls them to be humble enough to respect innocent children and the child in each of person, to welcome them, to become like them – honest, simple, open-hearted. He asks them to be last and not first, even with the most poor, disabled or meek. He wants them to follow a downward path of humility and servant-hood, to act like parents, like shepherds, like care-givers, instead of cut-throat pirates, belligerent soldiers, macho rulers, or conmen. And... he is asking that of each one of us today.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. (Matt. 5:3-8)

Martin Luther King, Jr. explains it this way: *"That's your new definition of greatness...It means that everybody can be great. Because everybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve...You don't have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love. And you can be that servant."*

This is the kind of community we strive to create here in the Glen Ridge Congregational Church: a community of mutuality, forgiveness and love, rather than scrambling to get to the front of the line and to prove who is the most fabulous. We then take these values out into our homes and work-life to model an alternative way – humble not arrogant, centered not scattered, caring not resentful. And we can take these values into our local polling booth as well.

Jesus *"took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."*

There was once a great chief who lived among the Wendat people in what is now Ontario, Canada. He thought he was more important than anyone else. But one day, an elderly woman said to him, "I know someone who is much more important than you."

"How can that be?" the great chief asked.

"Whenever this person is in the room, everyone gives them their attention."

Well, the great chief was most impressed. He wanted to go and meet this wonderful person who was even more important than him. "Come to my home tomorrow," said the woman, "and you shall meet this person."

The great chief could hardly sleep. Early the next day, he went to the woman's house. "Come inside and wait," she said. No sooner had the chief gone inside and sat down than he heard a baby cry. The baby cried and cried. It wouldn't stop crying. "Do something about that baby!" yelled the chief.

"Why don't you do something?" said the woman.

So, the chief went over to the baby. he made funny faces. But the baby kept crying. The chief danced. But the baby kept crying. The chief sang a song, but the baby kept crying. Finally, the chief picked the baby up, and carried it around. The baby stopped crying.

"Now," said the chief. "Can I please meet this most important person, the one who is even greater than me?"

"Look in your arms," said the woman. The chief looked very surprised and confused. "This child got all your attention. Is this child not greater than you?"

Let us strive, not to be great in the eyes of the world, but great in service, great in faithfulness, great in patience, great in wisdom, great in love. Thanks be to God. Amen.