

Wesley United Methodist Church

September 20, 2015

"Who Is The Greatest?"

Mark 9:30-37

A quick way to start a fight among sports fans is to ask who is the greatest. For example, since this is football season, who is the greater football quarterback? Tom Brady or Peyton Manning? Among golfers you might ask, how would Jack Nicklaus have done against Tiger Woods? To go back a few years, how about Magic Johnson and Larry Bird?

Some of you may remember a soccer player named Pele. Whether he was the greatest international sports star of all time is a matter of conjecture. But he was an amazing sports celebrity. Pele was such an internationally acclaimed soccer star that even a war was stopped for him. When Nigeria and Biafra were at war with each other, Pele needed to go from Nigeria to Biafra so that he could play soccer. So what did these two countries do? They stopped fighting so that Pele could travel safely between the two countries, and the war stayed stopped until the two opposing armies could escort Pele safely out of the war zone. On any sports greatness scale Pele stands pretty tall.

In our own nation, there are those who will contend that Michael Jordan was the greatest athlete of all time. In the golden age of the NBA, also known as the Michael Jordan era, there was a television ad campaign built solely around Jordan and the dreams of little boys to "be like Mike."

Some of you are probably upset with me for leaving out your favorite sports star. Some of you may be hockey fans. Edmonton Oilers head coach Ted Green got word that Shaun Van Allen, one of his start players, had suffered a concussion and couldn't remember who he was. Coach Green said, "Tell him he's Wayne Gretzky"--Gretzky being the greatest hockey player of his time.

Seeking to be no. 1, of course, is as old as Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers. The drive to be recognized as the greatest even infected Jesus' disciples.

Jesus and his disciples were passing through northeastern Galilee heading toward Capernaum. It was the first leg of their final journey toward Jerusalem. Jesus wanted to keep their presence from becoming known because his public ministry in Galilee had ended and now he wanted to prepare his disciples for what lay ahead.

They came to Capernaum, and Jesus had noted some bickering by his disciples while they had been on the road. When they were in the house, Jesus asked them what it was they argued about. They kept quiet because they were ashamed to admit that they had been arguing about who among them was the greatest. Matters of rank are important in any organization so it was only natural for the disciples to be concerned about their status in his kingdom.

We might think that such conversations would give Jesus a migraine. They did not. At least this one didn't. He understood such feelings. He understood that such drives were part of being human. After sitting down (which was the recognized position of a Jewish teacher) Jesus gathered the twelve around him and began to teach them. If anyone wants to be first in God's kingdom, he said, he must be willing to be the very least—and servant of all.

Jesus didn't chastise them for wanting to be first. He was not condemning anyone's desire to improve their position in life. Plenty of people interpret Jesus' teachings as such. Notice how the verse reads, "Sitting down, Jesus called the twelve and said, 'Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.'" In other words, Jesus is not saying to his disciples that it is wrong to want to be the greatest. He is saying, "If you want to be first, if you want to be great, here is what you must do... be willing to serve." He is not condemning their ambition. Ambition is an impulse given to us by God to help us better our lives.

There is no shame in being ambitious as long as you don't abuse other people in achieving your ambitions, and as long as you balance that ambition with your love for God and your neighbor.

Jesus was not condemning the disciples for their ambition. Nothing great in life is accomplished without ambition. Rather he was making a point that greatness in his kingdom is determined by service and not status. Jesus was saying to his disciples, "If you want to be first, here is what you must do. You must learn to serve others." Actually, Jesus was concluding one of history's finest success seminars. Every business person in the room knows it: you want to be number one in business—get a reputation for service.

It is interesting how Jesus made his point. He set a child among the disciples. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, "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."

It is important for us to know that in both Jewish and Greco-Roman societies children were considered the least important human beings. These societies idealized the mature adult, males in particular. Jesus took the child in his arms and continued his teaching. To welcome or show kindness to one of these little children in his name, he said, is equivalent to welcoming Jesus himself and not him only but also his Father in heaven. It is this perspective that dignifies the act of serving others.

God is not concerned about titles and position and status. He doesn't care if you are the CEO or if you're the one who sweeps the floors of the building. Titles do not impress God or qualify you to be a great man or woman. What qualifies you is a willingness to serve. In God's kingdom, greatness is servanthood.

Author Calvin Miller was in India when Mother Teresa died. He says he was struck by a Hindu city of eleven million people raising billboards to Mother Teresa's honor all over that sea of poverty that the world calls Calcutta. "Her sermons," says Miller, were not reputed to be great. It was her life that called for transformation and conversion."

I hope, as you look ahead to what remains of your life that you will determine to make this your legacy: whatever else you leave behind, you will seek to leave this world a better place because you have been here.

Jesus also left a legacy of service for his followers. He did it by wrapping a towel around his waist on the night he was betrayed and washing their feet. He taught them to serve by his own example.

What legacy will you leave? I'm not worried about you leaving behind a legacy of evil, but how much good will you leave? Will people be blessed because you have been here? You know what the secret is to a great legacy: service—service to your church, service to little children and young people, service to the poor and to the lonely, service to the elderly.