

The Greatest Mark 9:33-37

First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL
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This text makes us ask: what's great, and what's not great, and what's the greatest? And as is the case with scripture, and as is the case, especially, with Jesus, we know there's a trick to this question. A twist. What's the greatest? Who is the greatest?

I had occasion to drive slowly through some small towns on the way to Bob Twardock's graveside on Monday and Don Eberly's funeral on Tuesday. I drove through some big, big fields to get to some small, small towns. LeRoy, Lexington, Meadows, Gridley. Fisher and highway 47 that takes you to the turn-offs to Bellflower, Dewey, Derby, Elliot.

These are not great cities when it comes to population. They don't have a lot of great restaurants. They don't have a lot of great anything. They are small towns.

That's one of the things about greatness: we think greatness has to do with size. Chicago is a great American city, we say. What about Gibson City, population 3,407? Francis McDormand is from Gibson City, and she's a great, great actress; but is Gibson City a great, great city?

What's great? What's not-so-great? What's the greatest?

We might think size makes something great, like the largest ball of twine located in Cawker City, Kansas. That's a great, great piece of Americana. We might think fame makes somebody great. Francis McDormand, one of my favorite actresses, has won lots of acting awards, been in lots of movies, is pretty famous. She's won an Academy, Tony, Golden Globe and lots of awards—even a Saturn Award. Is she great?

What makes "GREAT"? Who decides? Size, wealth, fame, accomplishment? These characteristics become metrics of greatness for some people.

But Jesus comes up with another way to measure greatness.

Jesus and the disciples have just come down from the mountain where Jesus was transfigured. On their walk through Galilee as they approached Capernaum, plodding through small villages—pouring packs of peanuts into bottles of RC Cola at tiny gas stations in the most rural of outposts—the disciples talk about how they rank. Who among them is the greatest?

Jesus calls them on this. "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

For Jesus, greatness has little to do with who finishes first. Jesus loves the woman who finishes first in her nursing school class. But that first-place finish doesn't make her great. It's what she plans to do with that degree that matters. Will she be a servant to others? If so, she's going to be great.

Service becomes the metric by which we measure godly greatness. It's not your class rank. It's not how big your bank account is. It matters not how many awards you've earned. It doesn't matter if you've come from Gibson City or New York City. If you are a servant, you're doing a great thing. Being a servant is the key thing.

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Will Willimon tells a story that goes something like this. An agnostic friend sees one of his friends who has become a convert to Christianity. He asks his friend, "How is Christianity working for you?"

The convert says, "It's not work for me, it's working on me."

And what happens in a life of faith. It works on us. Jesus overhears our conversations like he did those of the disciples. Jesus gets in our heads. Jesus asks us questions we'd never ask of ourselves. Jesus notices things we don't notice. Jesus points out miracles we wouldn't see. He asks questions we wouldn't ask. Jesus teaches us lessons about living the faith that we wouldn't be able to learn on our own. Jesus uses the faith to work on us. Faith may or may not work *for us*, but it definitely works *on us*.

Service. Be great. Be a servant.

Jesus is working on his disciples just like he's working on us. He's getting us to think. He's asking us to take stock. He's challenging us to grow. If you want to be great, why are you working so hard to finish in first place? Instead, pay closer attention to who you are passing by. Thank some people. Serve some people. Love some people.

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What's great, and what's not great, and what's the greatest? Who is the greatest?

John Muirhead is a member of our church and community. He's great according to a lot of metrics. He's great because he's funny (to me), he's tall, he's from a cool city (Danville), he married well (Becky), and he's famous (he was in the newspaper last week). Those things don't make John great. John is great—like so many of you—because he's a servant. He was in the newspaper because he recently won the Claire Szoke Lifetime of Service Award presented at the eighth annual Immigration Welcome Awards by the Champaign-Urbana Immigration Forum.

John is great because he understands how important service is, and he spends much of his life trying to find ways to serve others. He has certainly served our immigrant population well.

John is a little embarrassed by the award, by the fame, by the recognition, by my calling him out. But he's not embarrassed by the service. He follows the lead of the man who long-ago set his disciples straight: Look, if you want to be the greatest of all, you'll be the servant of all.

Then Jesus did an amazing thing. He took a little child into his arms. Children had no place in a great man's world in the first century, which is exactly Jesus's point. This child becomes the poster-child of who Jesus wants us to seek out: those who have no voice, no vote, no place, those who need us. Find a way to serve people who aren't already famous. Find a way to serve the least of these. "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

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If we want to be disciples, we don't have to aspire to be great. If we want to be disciples, we must aspire to serve. It's as easy, as challenging, as fulfilling, as difficult as that. It's never too late to begin; and this is a job from which it is never appropriate to retire.

God will help us if we ask.

AMEN.

Let's pray: God we need your help to be disciples. We want to serve our neighbors. We need your help. We're asking. We're asking for your help. Help us, Lord. AMEN.

Gospel Mark 9:33-37 33Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" 34But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. 35He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." 36Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 37"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

James 3:8 8Draw near to God and God will draw near to you.