

Pentecost 17 / September 19, 2021

Mark 9:30-37

“But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.”

Who's the greatest?

Who's the greatest? Wayne Gretzky could score a goal skating backwards with one hand tied behind his back. He's known simply as “The Great One.” Catherine brought prosperity to 18th century Russia, through agricultural renewal and immigration. It was a golden era in Russian history. She is known as Catherine the Great. Alexander dominated the western world five centuries before the birth of Christ. He built an empire larger than anyone in previous history. In the process he created the Western Civilization, which we continue to experience today. He is known as Alexander the Great. All these people bear the title “Great” because they did great things! Great people accomplish great things. That's why the world honours them and remembers them.

Which of the disciples was the greatest? Peter, James and John were Jesus' inner circle. He took them to the mountain to pray and revealed His divine glory in blinding light. Peter was the first to confess Jesus as the Christ. Jesus blessed him and said, *“On this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell will not overcome it.”* However, John is referred to as the “beloved disciple,” suggesting a deeper friendship with Jesus. Which disciple was the greatest? Actually, from the perspective of “great people accomplish great things,” the greatest disciple was the Apostle Paul, who wasn't even a disciple at the time. He went farther and took the gospel to more people than all of the twelve combined.

Who's the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? Jesus said that no greater prophet had arisen than John the Baptizer. But then He said, *“He who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than He.”* To ask who is the greatest among ourselves or in the kingdom of heaven, is a misplaced and misguided question. Jesus is the greatest! He is the image of the invisible God, through whom all things came to be and in whom all things are held together. He is our Redeemer, who shared in our humanity that He might bring us to the Father in forgiveness, through the blood He shed on the cross. Jesus is the greatest! He accomplished more than the greatest emperor or empress, the redemption of the human soul. And He did it by shedding His own blood for the forgiveness of sin. Everyone has a place and importance in the kingdom of heaven, because of Jesus. He came not to be served, but to serve us and to give His life as a ransom for our salvation. Whether we are the Apostle Paul or an infant newly baptized, our greatness is in Jesus. He truly is Great One, our God and Saviour!

Great people do great things, but that doesn't mean they are great people. Wayne Gretzky is a good man. No one would associate him with anything bad. I don't think he had one fight. But Alexander built his empire on the blood and misery of thousands of men, children and women. He was a cold-blooded killer! And although good things came out of his world conquests, Alexander didn't build an empire for the betterment of humanity. Alexander did it for himself, to feed his pride, to do what no other conqueror had done. In human terms, the good that came was an accident of history. For those blessed with discernment by the Spirit, it was God bringing good out of evil that He might accomplish His saving purpose and bring the gospel to the nations.

Many people the world considers great, achieved their greatness because they were nasty people and had no qualms about walking over others to achieve their goals. That's not the kind of greatness Jesus expressed, or wants His followers to express! In the gospel of Luke, Jesus said to the disciples, *“The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you. Rather let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves.”* Jesus doesn't consider greatness as the world does; power and dominance! He considers greatness to be serving others out of love; not seeking glory or a reward. This is the service He came to offer to us; not making other people die for His greatness, but making us great in forgiveness by offering Himself into death on the cross.

The disciples argued as to which of them was the greatest. That's so human and so petty, at least to us on the outside. Have you ever watched people argue and thought, “How ridiculous”? Have you ever been in the midst of an argument and thought that? Probably not! Our perspective on the value and importance of an argument, depends on whether we are inside or outside. If the Apostle Paul, who was a Pharisee at this time, had witnessed the disciple's argument, he would have scoffed at them. He and his fellow Pharisees were the greatest, especially in comparison to this motely crew of uneducated fishermen, tax collectors, revolutionaries and whatever else the cat had dragged in. Jesus seemed to draw the dregs of society to Himself. In human terms, the disciples had no reason for pride.

The pharisees studied under the finest teachers. Their training was exacting. They had to be familiar with both the scriptures and the vast rabbinic tradition, known as the Talmud. The hoops they had to jump through were narrow and the bar was set high. They had to recite the five books of Moses from memory, just to be at entry level. They had to memorize whole Old Testament in order to advance further. In human terms, the disciples had nothing to boast of in comparison with the Pharisees. The fact that they argued as to which of them was the greatest, shows the depth of pride that dwells in the human heart. As Jeremiah the prophet said, *“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?”* It all looks so silly! If only we could see our sins and silliness as clearly as we can see other people’s sins. If we could see, we would be able to better and appreciate God’ love in Jesus our Saviour and walk more humbly with God in the humility of faith.

It’s human nature to compare ourselves to others. But no one can compare with God in terms of greatness. Our most righteous deeds are like filthy rags in comparison with God’s righteousness. God alone is great. He shows His greatness, by giving Jesus to bear the guilt of our sin on the cross. He shows His greatness, by sending the Holy Spirit to open our hearts to receive Jesus through the gospel. He shows His greatness, by cleansing us of our sin by Jesus’ blood in the washing of baptism. God alone is great and He gives the greatest expression of His greatness in Jesus and His service for our salvation. Jesus makes us all great by bringing us into God’s kingdom through the forgiveness of our sin.

If this is true and if we honestly believe we are sinners in the sight of God and in constant need of His grace in forgiveness; how could we ever feel the slightest tinge of pride in comparison to others? How could we ask who’s the greatest? How could we in any way think we are morally or spiritually superior to anyone? If we could see our sin and silliness as clearly as we see the sins of others, how could we do anything but thank God for His grace and pray for others also to receive His mercy in Christ Jesus!

Who’s the greatest? In the world great people do great things, but God considers greatness differently. Greatness is not overpowering others and dominating them with force. Greatness is not self-assertion or self-seeking. Greatness is following God in the humility of faith, treasuring His grace in forgiveness and seeking to share His grace in the same kindness towards others. Centuries before the birth of Jesus, the prophet Micah prayed, *“With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high?”* The Lord answered him, *“He has told you O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God.”* No one is great in the eyes of God, because of what they have done! We are great in God’s eyes because of His love and what Jesus has done for us!

In contrast to the world, Jesus said the great one is the servant. Jesus is the greatest servant. We follow Jesus by walking in His grace, serving others by sharing the gospel of salvation through faith in Him. We share Jesus not for our own pride and glory, not to make ourselves great, but because He is our great God and Saviour. He wants all people to believe. He wants all to receive the grace of forgiveness, from the greatest sinners to the most innocent children. All who receive Him receive the greatest gifts of all; forgiveness of sin, adoption as children of God and a place in God’s kingdom. God grant this to us all. In Jesus’ Name. Amen