

25th Sunday after Pentecost

September 23, 2018

Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

The Holy Gospel according to Saint Mark. (Mark 9: 30-37)

[Jesus and the disciples went on] and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it, for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then he 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."

The Gospel of our Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

"Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house [Jesus] asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest."

Who is the greatest? Or, for that matter, who is great? What is great? What does it even mean to be great?

I was leading some Bible studies at Music Camp this summer, and we were looking at this very text. And so I asked them, "Give me some examples of great. I want some examples of great." So one class told me, Thomas Jefferson was great. They said Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King were great. Eleanor Roosevelt, they said, was great. That was one class. The next class told me, "My cat is great." "Doritos are great." "Music Camp is great." They got some points for that one. But I realized that "great" is pretty wide-ranging, and pretty contextual. Something that is great in one place is not necessarily great in another.

Think about what makes you great at home or in your family. Is it a little empathy after a bad day? Is it bringing home pizza for dinner? Doing the dishes? What makes you a great mom or dad or spouse or kiddo? And how different is that from what makes you great at work? That direction and focus and skill level and ability to think well and problem solve.

And let's throw in a little of what the culture tells you is great, like, you know being rich, or a cool car, or great hair, a good body, lots of friends, taking great vacations, perfect family, ideal male or female, masculine or femininity, and perfect teeth. What is great? Who is great? It depends who you ask.

The disciples were arguing about who is greatest. Greatest at what? Greatest at being a disciple? Greatest at understanding Jesus? Greatest at fishing? Greatest at making pancakes in the morning? Or maybe they were just arguing about where they were on the social scale. The First Century was all about rank on the social scale. The jobs you could get, the people you could hang out with, where you sat at a dinner party, the favors you could receive from higher-up. It all depended on a very, very strict social ranking. Arguments about where you were on that social scale, who outranked whom, those arguments were going on all the time. And even the disciples got into it.

The disciples – let me think – several were fishermen. One was a tax collector. I think there was a zealot in there somewhere. These are not exactly at the top of the pecking order. Fishermen and tax collectors were about as low on the social scale as you could get, not permitted in polite society. And here they are, arguing about who outranks whom.

Enter Jesus. *“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”* Do you hear what he is saying? He is saying, “I reject the idea that people have a station in life.” “I reject the idea that people have worth by where they are born or what they achieve; that some people are more valuable than others.” “I reject the idea that some people are worthless and unwanted, while others are honored and appreciated.” “I reject the idea of greatness.”

It's pretty radical, don't you think? Whoever wants to be first must be last? It levels the playing field. We are all together in this life as equals, and there is no accounting of better or worthier or greater. We are valued the same – the first, the last, and everyone in-between.

But I wonder. Can we hear this as good news? Can we hear this as good news today? Jesus said we are all in this life together as equals and there is no greatest. Can we even get our heads around that? Can we hear it, we for whom competition is everything?

We all want to be the best we can be – to win at competitive sports, or back the winner, which, in Minnesota, is a little tough to do, but we try anyway. We want to have the most profitable company, the best skill set.

We want to have the strongest résumé so we can get the best job. In this market, people are competing to buy a home. Teens compete for the best grades at the best colleges. We compete on Facebook, for crying out loud, to show we have the best life.

Greatness is in our DNA. It's in our culture. It even find its way into our church at times. We are obsessed with greatness, with being better, being best. So is it good news that Jesus rejects the idea of rank, or winning, and or greatness? "*Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.*" Somehow I see us fighting, competing to be last in line, or to be the best servant we could ever be.

What is the good news here for us? Where is the Gospel? I think we need to ask ourselves, what are we trying to get for ourselves? What are you seeking? What are your needs? What do you want in this life? What do you need to feel alive? What is your deepest desire? And does the quest for greatness do that?

In 1964, Jean Vanier established the first L'Arche Community. L'Arche communities, where people with developmental disabilities who can do very little for themselves, these folks live in community with their caregivers. Not as caregivers and patients, but as friends who live together. There are now one hundred and forty-seven of these communities in thirty-seven countries, based on the belief that people with disabilities are teachers, not burdens.

In an interview, Vanier once said: "If you remain in your clan, your tribe of friends and family, you will remain closed up in your defense mechanisms. If you become a friend of someone who is rejected, you will discover something. Your defense mechanisms will start coming down, and you will discover what it means to be human."

He tells of a young man that lived in one of the communities. The guy was named Peter, he's from Canada, and he said, "I was asked to help a particular woman, Mamie, with dinner. And I didn't want to because I didn't have any particular contact with her. But I did it. And after about two weeks, one day she moved her face toward me, she was blind, but she moved her face, and she smiled at me. And something happened inside of me, something I didn't understand. I suddenly saw from this – the weakest person one could imagine – I saw that I was loved. Not because I was doing anything, not because I was feeding her better than someone else, but because there was a relationship where God was present."

Vanier continues. "Where there is no power game, no 'I am better than you,' there is no possessiveness, then there is a meeting of communion, and God is present there. But many people don't live that, because you can only have such a meeting where I am sufficiently weak in front of you and you are sufficiently weak and truthful in front of me. You can see my gifts. I can see your gifts. So there is a meeting at a level where, to put it in other words, the God in you meets the God in me."

I think there is good news here. There is good news when the first are last and the last are first. Good news when there is no rank, or greater than. And it is this: We discover that each one of us is truly beautiful. Worthy. Loved. We discover that we are truly human. And humans need each other. We are not God. We need help. We need community, not to compete within, but to hold each other up. Not looking down in pity, not looking up in competition, but seeing each other as beautiful and loved in all of our vulnerability and humanness.

I also think that, in its very best moments, the church can be the place to try out that kind of community. Where the weak and the strong, the old, the young, the rich, the poor, can see each other without competition, and just be our true selves. I think we can, not always, but sometimes, be vulnerable enough to each other, that we can see Christ between us. I think we can hold each other up and we can walk together. I've seen it happen. We can live that kind of community here and, with God's help, take it into the other places of our lives. And that is very good news!

You are beautiful. You are worthy. You are loved. It is what we all want in this life. And Christ is opening our eyes to see how it can be possible. The Holy Spirit is giving us the power to try it.

To close today, I would like a little help from those of you who are sitting in front of the balcony, because these words, this reminder, is with us every time we walk out of this room. Would you turn around and help me read the words of Christ.

Response:

“WHOSOEVER WOULD BE GREAT AMONG YOU
LET HIM BE THE SERVANT OF ALL.”

Amen.