

**First Presbyterian Church  
Southampton, New York  
“Who’s the Greatest?”**

**Mark 9: 30 – 37**

**19<sup>th</sup> Century Worship Service**

**September 20, 2015**

It seems to be part of the human condition that we are obsessed with wanting to know “who’s the greatest?” Unwilling to be content simply as the good Lord has made us, we must forever be in a state of froth over the issue of who it is that’s the “best.” Who’s the fastest? Who’s the smartest? Who’s the richest? Who rides the finest horse? Who has the most expensive buggy? Who’s the best cook? Who’s got the most meticulously manicured yard? Who’s the snazziest dresser? Who has the most important voice in the community? And on and on it goes!

We live in a state of constant comparison to one another; and we find no peace, no sense of self-worth, unless we can point to a neighbor who is somehow “less” than we are... in some way or other. It seems that only in favorably measuring ourselves against some other member of our fallen race, do we realize the assurance that our lives have meaning and purpose. And that’s a sorry state of affairs for you and me, beloved children of God; who are *all* of such worth in the eyes of our Heavenly Father, that He sent His only Son to die for us... that we might receive the gift of eternal life!

Almighty God says that in *His* eyes, we are all of infinite worth; but we say that in our *own* eyes, we are only worth the tainted shade of fleeting glory, which we momentarily claim by virtue of our sense of superiority over our struggling fellow pilgrim. For shame, brothers and sisters. For shame. Yet, our shame is somewhat moderated by the knowledge that even the disciples of Jesus were not exempted from the propensity to compare; that they, too, were plagued by the need to determine who among them was the greatest and the best. This, of course, was the theme of our lesson this morning from the gospel of St. Mark.

Now, consider with me for a moment, the unique position which was occupied by these twelve men, during the earthly life and ministry of our Lord. While it’s true that none of them were of noble birth, and that all of them (with the possible exception of Levi and Judas Iscariot) were from the peasant class; yet each of them had been hand-picked by Jesus Himself, to accompany Him as His closest allies and assistants.

They were eyewitnesses of Jesus’ miracles; they heard firsthand Jesus’ parables; they had front-row seats at the Sermon on the Mount; they were rooting on the sidelines as Jesus vanquished the scribes and the Pharisees. In short, they were on the first-string team of people that Almighty God was using to establish His kingdom on earth... and to bring about the salvation of the world!

Now, I ask you: could there possibly be a more important calling than that? Could there be a more meaningful, a more eventful, a more beautiful vocation than that? Could these twelve hand-picked men have possibly occupied a greater position in God’s plan of redemption than that? No, my friends! No they could not! By any standard of human measure, these men were already standing upon the apex of human greatness and achievement. And if anyone in human history

should have had an utterly fulfilled sense of personal value and self-worth... it should have been each of those twelve disciples. Alas, however, it was not to be. For even within the ranks of these twelve blessed, favored, chosen, and privileged men... the scourge of self-promotion and one-upmanship reared its ugly head; as was manifestly evident from our text this morning.

According to St. Mark, as our Lord and His disciples passed through the region of Galilee while engaged in Jesus' teaching mission, there arose a disputation among the Twelve. And when they reached their destination and resting place in Capernaum, on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus questioned them about the reason for their argument.

*"What was it that ye disputed among yourselves by the way?"* He asked them. But the disciples were mute with embarrassment, in response to this query... knowing that, as Mark informs us, *"they had disputed among themselves who should be the greatest."*

And though Mark doesn't record the specifics of the dispute, we can just imagine the kinds of things the disciples must have been saying:

*"I was the first disciple that the Master chose; obviously I'm the most important,"* said Peter.

*"Yes, but you're also always the first to put your foot in your mouth and make a fool of yourself,"* said Phillip.

*"I'm the most patriotic of the lot of us, so that makes me the greatest,"* said Simon the Zealot.

*"I'm the most recent disciple that Jesus chose, so He clearly saved the best for last,"* said Levi.

*"And you're also a former tax-collector and the biggest sinner of us all! So keep your mouth shut!"* said Thomas.

*"You're all wrong,"* shouted Judas. *"I'm the only disciple from Judea, so I'm more cultured than you bunch of Galilean hick nobodies. If that doesn't make me the greatest, I don't know what does!"*

And on, and on, it went.

No wonder none of them wanted to tell the Lord what they'd been arguing about during the walk to Capernaum. They sounded like a bunch of refugees from some first century Jerry Springer show. They were right to be embarrassed. Well, Jesus, who knows the hearts and minds of all people, was well aware of the nature of His disciples' dispute. But rather than give them the chastising which they all so richly deserved, he called them together, sat down among them, and said:

*"If any man desire to be first, the same shall be last of all, and servant of all."*

And in order to drive home His point even more forcefully, Mark tells us that He *"took a child, and set him in the midst of them: and when he had taken him in his arms, he said unto them, 'Whosoever shall receive one of such children in my name, receiveth me: and whosoever shall receive me, receiveth not me, but him that sent me.'"*

Well, my beloved friends, Jesus could not have provided a more thoroughgoing demolition of the misguided preoccupation with personal greatness with which His friends had been

afflicted... than He did by telling them that, in order to be great, you must become a servant! In order to be first, you must go last! Keep in mind that the same Greek word, δούλος, (doulos) which the King James Version translates as “servant,” also means “slave.” So, in essence, what Jesus was telling His disciples was, if you would be the greatest of your discipleship peers... you must serve them as their *slave*. If you would sit in discipleship chair number one among your fellows, you must get up *out* of it, and seat yourself in chair number twelve... and let the eleven hold preeminence above you. *Then* you will understand true greatness... as greatness is measured in the kingdom of God.

And just in case you missed my point, boys, here’s a young child (who, in the Middle Eastern culture of the time would have had no standing in the community whatsoever, and over whom all of those disciples would have lorded their relative greatness as adults in the community); here’s a young child, and I want you to know that, when you see him... he, is me! This young boy, this little child, which every one of you would count as “nobody...” this child counts as much as I do! Which means he counts as much as *you* do! Which is something you better remember... the next time you want to argue over who among you is the greatest.

You see, brothers and sisters, what Jesus is saying is that, in the eyes of Almighty God, there is no pecking order! There is no “better than,” no “greater than.” There is no “you matter a lot; but you matter a little...” no “I think *you’re* kind of special... but *you* I’ve no use for!”

Do you see? Do you understand? Do you get it? In the kingdom of God, we *all* matter! In the kingdom of God, we all count! In the kingdom of God, we’re all great! And that greatness is not of our own making... it’s God’s blessed and gracious gift to us. The answer to the question, “Who’s the greatest?” is, “God’s the greatest!” And because of His greatness, we have love; and we have peace; and we have forgiveness; and we have hope. And if we have *that*, then we have all we need to live a life that really matters! And that, my friends, is great!

So my beloved brothers and sisters, as we make our way into the autumn season before us, be not concerned about those who are counted as “great” in the eyes of this corrupt and sinful world. Be not envious of those who receive the world’s empty acclaim, and whose importance derives from the good opinion of wicked and godless men.

Be not discouraged when you, in spite of your kindness, generosity, and love, are ignored... and disrespected... and counted as nobody; by those who, in the thrall of utter cultural vacuity, idolize the Kardashians, and Caitlyn Jenner, and the Housewives of New York City. As if, in some deranged and maniac way, these people embodied true significance and... greatness. Be not downcast, I say; because, in the eyes of our Heavenly Father, each of you possess *real* greatness; each of you has eternal value; each of you is of such vast spiritual significance, that there is no power in heaven or earth that can ever take it from you.

And here in the church, let us refrain from falling into the same error that crippled the mission of Peter and James and their colleagues. Let us not bicker over who is greater than whom, within our church family. Let us not falsely think that one person’s opinion is of more worth than another’s. Let us not be distracted by the effort to arrange our voices into some kind of pecking order of significance; as if one person’s thoughts and desires were more important than everyone else’s.

Let us steadfastly resist all such exercises of ecclesiastical vanity; and let us instead invest our time and energy in the quest to hear *God’s* voice... and to respond to that voice in faithful

obedience; content in the knowledge that each and every one of us has a crucial and indispensable role to play in the mission of our church family. And that means *all* of us: young and old, male and female, those who've recently joined the church and those who've spent their whole lives here; all of us. To approach our ministry in *that* way, is to meet the challenge which Jesus gave, when He set that child in front of His disciples, and told them to receive the lad... just as they'd receive their Lord.

So, who's the greatest? Well, as I said, God's the greatest! And as we walk in the shadow of His love and grace... we're all pretty great, too!

So be it, always; in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!