

HOW GREAT WHO ART?

Sermon, September 23, 2018

Texts: Mark 9:30-37; James 4:1-12

We just read from Mark's gospel, "*The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days He will rise.*" Jesus has just told His disciples, in effect, that He is about to die; in fact, a central message in all four Gospels is that He has come to die. When we looked at this passage six years ago, I told you the story of an American on his first visit to Australia. He hails a taxi at the airport, the taxi driver gets out, takes the man's luggage, looks glumly at the American and asks, "*Did you come here to die?*" "Uh ... excuse me?" the tourist replies. "*Did you come here to die?*" the cabbie asked again. Dumbfounded, the poor tourist wondered what kind of ride he might be in for. He replies, "*Uh ... I don't THINK so.*" The cabbie responded, "*Well, then, did you come here yester-die?*"

Well, Jesus isn't speaking Australian; He's not had one too many Fosters. He is clear: **He has come to die.** He clearly tells the disciples He is going to be betrayed, killed and after three days He will rise again, and the disciples are even more dumbfounded than the American tourist! We're told v. 32, "*They did not understand what He meant and were afraid to ask Him about it.*"

Some background is in order. In this chapter are two stories we've looked at quite a few times together over the years (*on a related note, I lately realized I'm coming up on my 1000th sermon here; I think sometime January ... so I will repeat myself from time to time!*), so I'll just review quickly: In the beginning of chapter 9, Jesus had gone up to the Mount of Transfiguration with Peter, James and John. They had this glorious experience of seeing Elijah and Moses conversing with Jesus and hearing the clear voice of God affirming, "THIS IS MY SON." While they were up there on the mountain, we're told the other disciples, the ones who had been left behind down in the valley, had been asked by a desperate father to cast a demon out of his boy. We're told that although they've apparently knocked themselves out trying, they just cannot exorcise this demon. In Verse 14 of chapter nine, when Jesus, Peter, James and John come on the scene, they find the other disciples arguing. And of course, this makes sense. These disciples feel powerless to do what they've been asked to do, powerless to change what they want to change. So ... they argue. Disciples of Jesus often argue when we feel powerless, ineffectual, when we can't seem to get done what needs to get done. We argue with those in authority, we argue with each other, we argue with anybody who will listen to us. The truth of the matter is that much of our argument is really rooted in our frustration, in our powerlessness to fix what's wrong, in our inadequacy to do what we think Jesus has called us to do. But as I've also noted when we looked at that passage, this is not necessarily a bad thing! Being frustrated with the inability to effectively deal with evil is a mark of integrity and an innate goodness which instinctively knows evil must be dealt with, it must be resisted! After all, if the followers of Jesus Christ out of loving concern for others don't resist evil, who will?

All of us know that feeling of just being overwhelmed by what's wrong, and/or being overwhelmed by the evil in the world about us. At times it doesn't matter how hard we try or what we do, we just don't have it in us to cast out evil all by ourselves. And, in a way, that's good news. When we come to the realization we are not great enough to cast out evil by ourselves, well, that is when we are really ready for a great Savior. For salvation comes not through our power; salvation comes only through the great power and ability of Jesus Christ. Verse 19, Jesus says to the disciples, "*Bring the boy to Me.*" That verse ought to be underlined at least two times in our Bibles. "Bring the boy to me." Bring your burdens to Me, bring your frustrations to Me, bring the people you love to Me. And they did ... the boy was brought to Jesus, and the boy was healed.

And that brings us to our reading today. Not long after this miraculous event, we find the disciples arguing again. When Jesus says to them, "*The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days He will rise*", we then read, "*They did not understand what He meant and were afraid to ask Him about it.*" They came to Capernaum, and it's obvious there were having some sort of "discussion" along the way, which the disciples hoped to keep out of Jesus' earshot. We're told when they were in the house at Capernaum (*aside: it was possibly Peter's house, those of us who traveled there in February know a church is built over the house believed to be the home of Peter*), Jesus asked them, "*What were you arguing about on the road?*" But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest."

Now, let me try to pull this all together: In this action packed chapter from which our text for the day has come, we know they've just seen Jesus in His glorious transfiguration in the company of Moses and Elijah, they've just heard the audible voice of God affirming Jesus' divine identity and authority, they've just witnessed Jesus' incredible power over evil, and Jesus then gives all of them the unsettling and disturbing news that He is going to die, and ... they decide to have an argument about who among them is the greatest disciple? All those fantastic experiences to talk about, and they choose to have something of a collective Muhammad Ali moment boasting "I'm the Greatest!?" Did their argument go something like this, with Peter saying, "*Well, I am Jesus' right hand man. I'm the one who first called him the Christ. I am the group's spokesman. Therefore, I am the greatest!*" Andrew then speaks up and says, "*Now*

wait a minute, big brother, let me remind you of something which you have conveniently forgotten. I was called FIRST. In fact, I was the one who invited you to come to Jesus. I got you here. So, I am the greatest.” The Zebedee brothers James and John speak up: “Wait a minute, you two. Greatness is measured by how much you sacrifice. We stood to inherit our father’s lucrative fishing business. We gave that up. So, we’re the greatest.” Matthew chimes in: “Well if you want to talk about giving up money, I was a tax collector. None of you had as much money as I did, and I left that all behind when I got up from my tax booth. I am the greatest.” And Judas is thinking to himself, “Aah, you’re all a bunch of losers. I’m the greatest. Just wait. I’ll show you.”

No, I DON’T THINK SO. Frankly, I think that traditional disciple-bashing interpretation is a bit smug, looking down our noses over the centuries and thinking “They just don’t get it.” Mark doesn’t tell us the argument was about them ... in fact, the words “among them” are not in the text! Again, remember the background: Three of them had just seen Elijah and Moses, conversing with Jesus up there on the mountaintop. And *all* of them just saw Jesus cast out that demon, demonstrating great and convincing power over evil. Also, we know from other references that all the disciples earlier heard Jesus say this about John the Baptist: *“I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John.”* So we have Moses, Elijah, Jesus, John ... four great men, four models of exemplary faithfulness. No, I don’t think the disciples were arguing about which of the DISCIPLES was number one. I think the context implies they were arguing about who was the greatest among Moses, Elijah, Jesus, John. I think they were arguing about who was the greatest the way passionate sports fans argue over their heroes. *“Tom Brady is the greatest quarterback today.” “What, didja miss the last Super Bowl? Nick Foles is the greatest!”* And when Jesus asked them why they were arguing, their silence may have been because they didn’t want to tell Jesus they had considered others beside Him as the Greatest, or to openly contradict what He said earlier about John. Just a thought!

Jesus then uses this as a teaching moment to tell them what makes for true greatness. Jesus uses this moment to speak to that really good argument; He uses this moment to clarify for them what makes for true greatness. Jesus says, *“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”* In other words, true greatness is about humbling ourselves (*and James would certainly agree*); true greatness is about giving up the self-righteous, self-promoting and self-aggrandizing attitude that thinks ITS ALL ABOUT ME, and learning to genuinely love and serve and look out for the welfare of others God brings our way, especially those who are as vulnerable and helpless as that little child Jesus set before them. And so much more could be said about this, but as they were soon to find out, Jesus *would* go through the ultimate humiliation out of love and service and sacrifice and become the ultimate servant of all. He had come to die, that the children of God might live.

We read from James 4: *“What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something, but don’t get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and He will come near to you. ... Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will lift you up.”* . In short, according to James, it’s all about recognizing: *“How Great WHO Art?”* The short answer: IT’S NOT US. When we humble ourselves before God, we start seeing things as He sees them, and we are given a better perspective about which things are really worth arguing about and which things are not. About which things matter, and which things really don’t. About which things are great, and which things are really trivial. When we humble ourselves before God, we acknowledge His greatness (not ours), His authority (not ours), His wisdom (not ours), and then He lifts us up into His greatness.

Just a brief word about verse 11 -- *“Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it.”* The Greek word translated “slander” is *katalalia* – from “kata”, which means against, and the verb “laleo,” which means “to speak.” “Do not speak against one another,” James pleads. It may be a coincidence, or it may have linguistic roots, but I like it that “kata” sounds like “catty” ... so, no “catty” talk, says James! Yes, there are things worth arguing about. However, as James warns, in our arguing let’s first and foremost humble ourselves before the God Who in Jesus Christ has commanded us to love and serve each other just as He loved us! Let’s not be so quick to attribute evil motives, evil intent, evil actions to another and in so doing become part of the problem of evil ourselves! On one hand, we should not gossip; on the other hand, we should be telling tales all over town! But the tales we should be telling should be good tales, not bad. I know it’s human nature to *katalalia* about people’s vices, but try “gossiping” about people’s virtues, not their vices. Spread tales about the good things you see people do! All of us instinctively know the person who gossips TO you will gossip ABOUT you. Well, if person comes to you saying nothing but good things about others, then you’ll want to be around such a person, because you trust such a person will then go and report good things about you as well! Speaking nothing but kind words does so much to foster healthy community.

If we disciples of Jesus want something really worth arguing about, let’s argue about ways to be truly great. Let’s argue about how we may better serve each other, let’s argue about ways we can better speak to and about each other, let’s argue about ways we can better serve the well being of any our great God may bring our way, let’s argue about how we can best lift each other up. For, as Jesus affirms, the core of genuine greatness is about serving others, it’s about helping others, it’s about resisting and confronting the evil that detracts from the lives of others and ourselves; in short, it’s about LIVING the kind of life that leads and welcomes us into the presence of Greatness Himself.