

# THINGS WORTH ARGUING ABOUT

Sermon, September 19, 2021

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

*"To God be the glory, great things He has done,"* our soloist just sang ... and great things He continues to do through those who humble themselves before Him in service to all He brings our way. That is pretty much my sermon this morning. I probably could stop now ... but, I won't.

While visiting the National Presbyterian Church in Washington, DC (*where Ann and I were married in 1990*) in 2001, I heard a story I've shared with you before; it was about a woman in that church who lost her husband. He died very unexpectedly of a heart attack ... while attending a committee meeting at the church. Shortly after his funeral, on a Sunday, this woman noticed a young couple having an argument there in the church, right near the very spot where her husband died. When she saw this couple arguing, every fiber in her being wanted to break in and say, *"STOP IT! Just stop it, will you? Don't you see what you have? Don't waste the precious time you have with each other in petty argument."*

Sometimes a little perspective changes everything.

James writes in so many words, *"What causes fights and quarrels among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God (properly); when you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your passions."* He goes on to say, *"Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw 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. (*The hymn sung just prior to the sermon two weeks ago was, "How Great THOU Art."*) When we really humble ourselves before God, when we acknowledge His greatness (not ours), His authority (not ours), His wisdom (not ours), it's not too long before we start seeing things as He sees them, and we are also given a better and a higher perspective about which things are really worth arguing about ... and which things just are not. Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you.

In verse 11, James continues, *"Brothers and sisters, do not speak evil against one another. Anyone who speaks against a brother or judges him speaks evil against the law and judges it."* The one Greek word that is translated with the two English words "speaks against" is the word *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, says James, no "catty" talk against each other! Now, to be sure, 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 each other just as He loved us! This, some scholars believe, is the Law to which James refers ... the special Law Jesus gave His disciples on the night He was betrayed. Let's not be quick to attribute evil motives, evil intent, evil actions to another and in so doing become part of the evil problem ourselves! Eugene Peterson's The Message rather loosely, but effectively, paraphrases: *"Don't bad-mouth each other, friends! It's God's Word, His Royal Rule, that takes a beating in that kind of talk."*

Mark 9 records two instances of Jesus' disciples arguing, two stories we've looked at quite a few times together over the years (*on a related note, I recently calculated I'm on or near my 1,200th sermon here ... so I do tend to repeat myself from time to time!*). In the beginning of chapter nine, Jesus had gone up to the Mount of Transfiguration with Peter, James and John. They had that glorious experience of seeing Elijah and Moses conversing with Jesus and hearing the audible voice of God affirming, *"This is my Son"* and commanding, *"Listen to Him!"* While they were up there having this mountaintop experience, we're told the other disciples, the ones who had been left down in the valley, had been asked by a concerned, loving father to cast an evil presence out of his boy, an evil that was causing this boy to just self-destruct. And although they apparently were knocking themselves out trying, these disciples just could not exorcise this demonic evil. When Jesus, Peter, James and John come on the scene, they find the other disciples arguing. And of course, that makes sense ... we disciples can often argue when we feel powerless, ineffectual, when we think we aren't really making a difference. We argue with those in authority, we argue with each other, we argue with anybody who will listen to us ... and the reality is that much of our argument is really rooted in our frustration with ourselves, in our powerlessness to fix what's wrong and to deal with evil in our world about us, and/or in our sense of inadequacy to do what we think Jesus has called us to do. This is not necessarily a bad thing! Being frustrated with the inability to effectively deal with evil is a mark of your integrity and innate goodness and your genuinely loving concern which instinctively knows evil must be dealt with, it must be resisted ... and one thing certainly worth arguing about is how to effectively deal with the very real presence of evil in the world about us! How do we exorcise it? After all, if the followers of Jesus Christ out of loving concern for the

welfare of others don't resist evil's insidious destruction, who will? However, as James warns, in the process of doing so, let's not form circular firing squads, let's not be so quick to attribute evil motives, evil intent, evil actions to others in the household of faith and in so doing become part of the problem rather than part of the divine solution!

Not long after the miraculous event of Jesus healing that boy we find the disciples arguing again. Today's reading, Jesus is saying: *'The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and when He is killed, after three days He will rise.'* Jesus tells them, in effect, He is about to die; in fact, He has specifically come into this world to die. He clearly tells them He is going to be betrayed, killed and after three days will rise again, and we're told, *"They did not understand what He meant and were afraid to ask Him about it. They came to Capernaum. When He was in the house, He 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."* (this wasn't mentioned during the sermon, but the house in Capernaum talked about here was quite possibly Peter's house, those of us who traveled there in February 2018 stood in the church with a transparent floor now built over the house believed to be the home of Peter.)

Now, let me try to pull this all together: In this action packed chapter from which our text 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 this foreboding message of Jesus, and they choose to have something of a collective Muhammad Ali moment boasting "I'm the Greatest!"? (for those too young to remember, that was the exuberant boast of brash 22-year-old then-Cassius Clay after soundly defeating champion Sonny Liston in 1964; my brothers and my dad were listening to it on the radio in our home). Did their argument go something like this, with Peter saying, *"Well, Jesus called me The Rock. I'm the one who first called Him the Christ. So, I am the greatest!"* Andrew speaks up and says, *"Now wait a minute, big brother, you forget I was the one who was called FIRST. In fact, I was the one who invited you to come to Jesus. 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 gave up our father's lucrative fishing business to follow Jesus. So, we're the greatest."* Matthew chimes in: *"Well, I was a tax collector. None of you had as much money as I did working for the IRS, and I left it all when I got up from my tax booth. I am the greatest."* And maybe Judas is thinking, *"Aahh, 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 rather smug, disciple-bashing interpretation misses the point altogether! Mark doesn't tell us the argument was about *them* ... the words "among them" are not in the text! Again, remember: 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 all of them heard Jesus say about John the Baptist: *"I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John ..."* So Moses, Elijah, Jesus, John ... four great men, four towering models of exemplary faithfulness. I think the disciples were arguing about which of *those* four was the greatest, not which of the Twelve. And when Jesus asked why they were arguing, their resulting silence may have been because they didn't want to tell Jesus to His face they had actually considered others beside Him as the Greatest, nor did they want to openly contradict what He said about John. Just a thought. Anyway, here's my point: What makes for true greatness is really not a bad thing for disciples of Jesus to be arguing about!

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, *"If anyone would be first, he 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, and *especially* those as vulnerable and helpless as that little child Jesus set before them. 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 servant of all. He had come to die, that the children of God might live.

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 in need our great God may bring our way, let's argue about how we can best lift each other up and encourage each other as together we humble ourselves before God. 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 selflessly LIVING a life of humble service which lifts us into the presence of Greatness Himself.

Yes, *"To God be the glory, great things He has done,"* ... and great things He continues to do through those who humble themselves before Him in service to all He brings our way.