

The Greatest
James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37
September 24, 2006

There's a story about a man whose great ambition was to become a general in the army. He imagined all the attention he would get, everybody saluting him, somebody to drive him around, all the perquisites of that high rank. One day he reached his goal. He was promoted to Brigadier General.

The next day he moved into his new office and sat behind his new, big desk. He could just feel the power emanating from that office. His aide walked in and said, "There's a man here to see you." The general said, "Send him right in."

He thought, "I'm going to impress this man with how important I am, how much power I have." He turned around, picked up the phone, and pretended that he was talking to the President of the United States. He said, "Mr. President, I understand what you are saying to me. I think your idea is a good one, and I can tell you that I will share it with the Secretary of Defense when I see him tomorrow. Thank you for calling. Goodbye, sir."

He hung up the phone, turned around, and saw this ordinary soldier standing there. The general barked at him, "What can I do for you, young man?" The soldier said, "Nothing, sir. I'm just here to hook up your phone."¹

Imagine the red-faced embarrassment of that general. His plot to pretend great importance and prestige had fizzled!

Perhaps he felt like the disciples when Jesus greets them after their walk to Capernaum, "What were you arguing about on the way?" The disciples are too embarrassed to answer Jesus directly. It is Mark, the narrator, who informs us that they had been arguing about who was the greatest. We can imagine their conversation.

James remarks, "John and I were privileged to have a private audience with Jesus on the mount of transfiguration. We saw things no one else has seen. Who can top that?"

Peter boasts, "Don't forget that I was there with you. Besides that, I had faith enough to walk on water."

Simon the Zealot laughs. "Yes Peter, but we also remember you sinking when you became a fraidy-cat! You ain't seen nothing yet. Wait until I help Jesus overthrow those brutal Romans."

Matthew the tax collector brags, "I'm the one with powerful connections in high places."

Judas the treasurer can no longer hold back. “You guys seem to be forgetting who holds the purse strings. Remember that money is power.”

When confronted directly by Jesus, the disciples are ashamed to confess their conversation, but he knows anyway. He tells them, “So you want first place? You want to be on top? Then take the last place. Be the servant of all.”

Jesus is constantly turning things upside down and inside out. He sets a standard contrary to tradition. The disciples expect that the one who is the most religious, most intelligent, or hardest working will be deemed the greatest. Perhaps the motivation for their debate is their need and hunger for acceptance. There is an unconscious expectation that the one who is the greatest will receive the most love from Jesus.

We live our lives as though God only has a limited amount of love to dole out. God might run out of love, so we had best try to make a name for ourselves and insure that there will be enough love for us. We cannot comprehend the fact that God has an infinite supply of love for us. It truly is possible for each of us to be special in God’s eyes. My being special does not preclude you from being special as well. God’s love is like an ocean; there is room for everyone of us to swim in it. There is an invitation for each of us to swim in God’s love.

If we can accept God’s love, if we don’t feel compelled to compete for God’s approval, if we don’t need to focus our energy in climbing the ladder of greatness, we experience a taste of freedom. Take a deep breath and experience that gift. Say these words with me: God loves me. I am a beloved child of God. God’s heart is large enough for me.

When we trust at a deep level that God does love us, we are free to focus on others. We can look beyond ourselves to the hurts and aches of our neighbors. Love always seeks to serve. If we are secure in God’s love, serving others and being last is not a big deal. We will not lose out on any of God’s love for us.

The real heart of servanthood is security. Someone who thinks she is too important to serve is basically insecure. How we treat others is really a reflection of what we think about ourselves. Philosopher-poet Eric Hoffer said, “The remarkable thing is that we really love our neighbor as ourselves; we do unto others as we do unto ourselves. We hate others when we hate ourselves. We are tolerant toward others when we tolerate ourselves. We forgive others when we forgive ourselves. It is not love of self but hatred of self which is at the root of the troubles that afflict our world.”²

Disciples who are secure in God’s love possess the confidence to serve others. Service begins with security in God’s love for us.

Once we are anchored in God's love, servants can then put the needs of others above their own. They put others ahead of their own agenda. They are aware of other people's needs, available to help them, and able to accept their desires as important.

This passage makes that abundantly clear. It tells us that the needs of other people around us are more important than our own success. Jesus pours out his heart to his followers. These twelve men live with him for three years. They are his closest friends. He had just told them, "I am going to die," and they pay no attention. They don't understand, yet they are afraid to ask.

Someone says, "I lost my job," or "I lost my marriage," or "I got word from the doctor yesterday." That is when you need friends to put aside everything else and come to be with you, stay with you, sacrifice something for you.

We live in a society in which success is everything. There is nothing more important than getting to the top and having power and riches. Our culture condones almost anything to get you there, including ignoring the needs of people around you.

Christian faith stands over against such thinking. It says that if your ambition blinds you to the needs of other people, then it is wrong. Jesus offers an alternative way of living. "Whoever wants to be first must be last and servant of all."

In the reign of God, the places of greatness are determined by our attitude toward the weakest and most vulnerable members of society. In Jesus' day, children are second-class citizens. They are nobodies. Jesus uses a child to illustrate that real greatness comes in developing an attitude and ability to be of service to those who are invisible in society.

A few years ago Henry Aaron wrote an article honoring Jackie Robinson's 50th anniversary of coming into the major leagues of baseball. Hank Aaron wrote that what made Jackie Robinson great was that he was willing to humble himself.

Jackie Robinson was a proud man. He had a quick temper. However, he and Branch Rickey had determined that the strategy for changing things in the world of baseball was for Robinson to humble himself. Robinson's restraint during those days in the face of prejudice was heroic on his part.

Aaron noted that there was another dimension to Robinson's humility. He pointed out that Robinson did not do what he did for himself alone. He did what he did primarily for other people. He knew that if he were successful, other African-American athletes would be able to follow him.

Hank Aaron remembers that in 1947 as a teenager, his father took him to an exhibition baseball game when the Dodgers were playing in Alabama. Jackie Robinson was in a Dodgers uniform. It was something they thought they would never ever see. Hank Aaron said, “That day I knew that I could do that too.” And we know that he did.³

Servants humble themselves. They put the needs of others ahead of their own agendas.

Jesus teaches that the real path to greatness is not through power and prestige. Those who desire to be great are those who choose to serve others. Security in God’s love for us gives us the confidence to serve others. Anchored in God’s love, servants can put the needs of others above their own.

Menachem Schneerson, the famous Lubavitcher rabbi from Brooklyn, used to stand every week for hours as thousands of people filed by to receive his blessing or his advice about matters great and small. Once someone asked him how he, who was in his 80s, could stand for so long without seeming to get tired. The rabbi replied, “When you’re counting diamonds you don’t get tired.”⁴

Those who serve others as diamonds are the greatest of all disciples.

¹ Thanks to Rev. Norman Neaves.

² Quoted in John C. Maxwell, *The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), p. 137.

³ Thanks to Rev. Mark Trotter.

⁴ Joel Marcus, "Counting diamonds," *Christian Century*, August 30, 2000, p. 861.

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