

The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 27, 2015
Amazing Grace Lutheran Church – Pastor Chip Wilke

Mark 9:30-37

They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, because he was teaching his disciples. He said 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." But 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. Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all." He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me." (NIV)

Who is the greatest? This is a conversation people have all the time. We hear people even arguing. Is it Aaron Rodgers, Peyton Manning, or Tom Brady? Who is the greatest? Is it Katy Perry or Taylor Swift? Who is the greatest? Is it Donald Trump or Hilary Clinton? I really do not need to ask what it means in the eyes of the world to be great because I hear it and I see it constantly. Sometimes I even think it. And I'm sure you do too! Greatness is seen in fame and accomplishment and status and power and achievement. Greatness is all about the record books and making a name for yourself. Greatness is all about getting to the top and staying on the top. Some say you just know greatness the moment you see it. We have greatness all figured out, don't we? Or do we? Jesus opens our eyes today to true greatness. I pray we listen. I pray we learn. I pray we follow. I pray we are able to answer without hesitation this question: **Who is the greatest?**

The disciples of all people should have known the answer to this question. They saw Jesus perform one eye-opening miracle after another. They watched as Jesus' popularity grew and grew. Jesus couldn't go anywhere without a large crowd of people gathering around Him. Peter, James, and John especially should have had no doubt about who is the greatest. Jesus had just taken them onto the mountain of transfiguration where He showed them a jaw-dropping glimpse of His awesome glory as God. Once again Jesus just revealed greatness by driving out an evil spirit that had been tormenting a young boy. After this event, we are told Jesus and his disciples *"left that place and passed through Galilee."* *Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, because he was teaching his disciples."*

Listen closely to what Jesus now teaches them and to how the disciples react. *He said 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." But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it."* For the first time Jesus tells the disciples he is going to be betrayed. As He has before, Jesus again alludes to His suffering, His death, and then to His resurrection. And do you catch the disciples' reaction? They don't understand. They don't ask. They are even afraid to ask Jesus about it. Maybe it was because Jesus said someone would betray Him. Maybe it was because the last time when Peter objected to this teaching Jesus rebuked Peter saying: *"Get behind me, Satan! You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men"* (Mark

8). Maybe they were in denial that these terrible things could really happen to Jesus whom they confessed to be the Christ. Perhaps they had a big misunderstanding about true greatness.

That last truth is seen by what the disciples do next. As they make their way to Capernaum, a city right on the Sea of Galilee and the home of Peter & Andrew, they start to argue ***“about who was the greatest.”*** Think about this. Jesus tells them He is going to be betrayed and they are worried about who gets a higher position - about who get to be first. Jesus just spoke about the horrible suffering in front on Him, that He was about to sacrifice Himself for them and the rest of the world - and they are arguing over who deserves more than the next guy. Jesus speaks of resurrection and they bicker over who is the greatest!

But isn't that just like the sinful selfish nature? The very same one that lives inside of us! We want to be first. We want to be great. Sure it can happen over big things. We might step on others in the workplace to get to the top. We might trample all over other people's reputations to try to gain more friends, put others down trying to make ourselves look better. But I also see it in even the little things in life. What do we do when we have a meal where we have to get in line to eat? Do we always want to be first? Or in traffic are we so great and in such of a hurry that we really need to cut others off or refuse to let someone in? Who is the greatest? So many times we are just like the disciples - even worse we act like we already know the answer to the argument. We think we are the most important!

So all of us disciples could use this lesson from Jesus, couldn't we? Jesus asks them, ***“What were you arguing about on the road?”*** The accounts in Matthew and Luke fill in some of the details. At first, the disciples are quiet and keep silent. They are embarrassed over what they were saying. But when they get up the nerve they come to Jesus and ask, ***“Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”*** (Matt. 18) They want to actually know who is the greatest. What makes someone great in God's eyes? ***“Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, “If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.” He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.”***

Wow! Do we ever have an upside down view of greatness! Greatness is not about fame, or power, or glory, or status. Greatness is not about making a name for yourself. Greatness is not about what you have accomplished to get to the top. Jesus says it is about becoming last. It is about being a servant of all. God sees greatness in humble service - service done out of love for God and others. I've always loved how Jesus answers this question about being the greatest by getting this child. He takes this little child to His disciples, holds this kid in His arms, and says: ***“If you want to be great start here. Serve this little child and by doing so you serve me and the Father who sent me.*** This is Jesus' idea of greatness - welcoming a little child in His name.

Is the answer to who is the greatest starting to become clear now? All we need to do is look to the greatest servant of all! Jesus didn't come to earth and walk around thumping His chest saying: ***“I am the greatest.”*** He came to earth to take on the form of a servant. Jesus wanted his disciples to learn it wasn't His miracles that made Him great but the fact He became a man for them. Jesus was not going to show the disciples true greatness by exerting His power and flashing His glory as true God, He was going to do it by making Himself nothing and by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. Jesus came to serve and give up His life on a cross as a ransom for all. The disciples later would see that Jesus' true greatness was in His betrayal, rejection, suffering, death, and resurrection. I pray we have learned the same.

This last Thursday night the Washington Redskins played the New York Giants. Something happened I thought was pretty great and I'm not talking about any spectacular plays on the field. This happened without hundreds of thousands of people watching and wouldn't have even been known if one person didn't witness it and report it. DeAngelo Hall, a defensive back from Washington, was hurt. I believe he tore something in his toe. He has had major injuries a couple times before and so you could see the pain in his eyes as they had him on a cart on the sideline. As they were taking him to the locker room I guess there was a young boy, a Redskin fan, who yelled out, "*DeAngelo, I'll say a prayer for you.*" This NFL player turned to say, "*Thanks, I really needed that*" and he tossed the child his game jersey.

Who is the greatest? Greatness is in those little acts of love done even when no one is watching. Greatness is seen in a mother making supper for her children. Greatness is found when a father is saying bedtime prayers with his children. Greatness is mowing the lawn or cleaning here at church. Greatness is taking time to visit one of our widows or bringing a meal to someone who has been sick. Please ask God to keep opening our eyes to see real greatness.

Jesus sets us straight. True greatness in God's eyes and in God's kingdom is found in loving service. That's why for us there really is no argument. There really is not a question at all. No athletes, or performers, or presidents, even come close to our Jesus. He is the servant of all. By grace we understand that it is Jesus' cross that makes Him great; for there He washed away all our sins with His blood. There Jesus made the sacrifice that saved us all. When our graves our empty one day like His, there will be no more conversations or debates because all will see the truth - Jesus is the greatest! Amen.