

**Sermons from Archwood United Church of Christ  
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**Mark 9: 30-37**

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**Mark 9:30-37**

9:30 They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it;

9:31 for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again."

9:32 But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

9:33 Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?"

9:34 But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.

9:35 He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

9:36 Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them,

9:37 "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent m

They didn't mean it, did they? They were just joking around, right? I mean, who over the age of 6 argues about who's the greatest. And if you say Donald Trump, well, he's not exactly the model of Christianity, though I'm sure he's got his good qualities. He seems always ready and willing to share his knowledge and expertise. He, too, tries to model a way of life for his disciples, otherwise known as his Apprentices, and generally about a dozen at a time. There are, of course, more than a few obvious differences between Donald Trump and Jesus. As a disciple of Donald, make a mistake and it's to the boardroom for a "You're Fired!" For the apprentices of Christ, it's a wonder Jesus didn't fire the whole group. They are constantly bungling things. Lose a challenge with Donald, it's downstairs to a cab ride home. Completely misunderstand the teachings of Jesus and it's a walk down the road, with him, so he can keep trying to help you understand. What a boss!

As our passage begins today, Jesus has told his disciples a second time that the end of all their journeying will be a confrontation in Jerusalem resulting in his death and resurrection. They already had this lecture once. And they didn't want to hear it the *first* time. After this second attempt, Jesus will give them yet another third try to understand what he is saying. And just to prove how oblivious they were to the seriousness of the matter, they argue among themselves about who is the greatest. Jesus has overheard them.

There *was* some jealousy going on. Earlier in chapter 9 Jesus had singled out Peter, James and John to accompany him to the top of the mountain where they had witnessed his transfiguration. That *did* kind of give them bragging rights, but as we know, to whom much is given, much is required. Yet, for as much as the squabbling disciples knew about "blessed are the meek, blessed are the poor, blessed are the humble," (they had probably already heard this a million times and it had started to sound like "clean your room, eat your vegetables, don't hit your sister"), as many times as Jesus had tried to not only *tell* them but *demonstrate* to them that he came to turn the world upside down (or as I heard someone say recently, "turn the world right side up") for as many times as they heard the words and saw the actions of Jesus to reinterpret the wisdom of the world and replace it with the wisdom of God, they didn't get it. Jesus came to change the world, but through very different, and often unpopular, means: First becomes last; last becomes first. The rich will be empty; the hungry will be full.

We should note that when Jesus was trying to get the disciples to understand his mission, it was a private tutoring session. He had taken them away from the crowds. They could ask questions without being embarrassed in front of the crowds. But not only did they *not* ask any questions, Mark says they were *afraid* to ask. They were afraid to ask a serious question.

How many times have you preferred not to know something, to not ask questions? Are you ever afraid that once you know something, you become accountable for what you know. The world knows about the genocide in Darfur, Sudan, and the world will be accountable for not having stopped it – just like the world preferred not to know about genocide in Rwanda and let millions die. Those who can't provide us with oil are expendable.

What are we afraid to know? When we know how hard it is to make a living on the minimum wage, it's hard to ignore an opportunity to vote to make a change. What are we afraid to know? Do you want to know the HIV status of a date, or our own? What are you afraid to know? Do you want to know what it would take to begin tithing, or is better not to know and always think we don't have enough? What are we afraid to know? Are we afraid to ask tough questions, especially those that might require something from us?

So, again, the disciples aren't talking among themselves about the mysteries of Jesus, focused on the needs of others, they are arguing about who's the greatest, focused on the needs of their egos. (Perhaps they really were the precursors of Donald Trump's apprentices and his ego.)

Before there were reality shows on every channel every night of the week, Mark Burnett, the force behind the show Survivor, produced something called Eco-Challenge from 1995-2002. It wasn't televised in the same way so fewer people have heard of it. The games couldn't be more different in philosophy, even though they contained many of the same kinds of extreme danger and challenges. On Survivor, the winner has done everything in his or her power, including lying, cheating and stealing, to get to the end, avoiding being voted off the island. They may make alliances to get through to the end, a "Coalition of the Willing," but they can just as easily turn against an ally if that would give them the advantage. Outwit, outlast, outplay. It shares the similar characteristics to the Apprentice, Big Brother and some other popular shows, ones where the greatest have climbed over their opponents at any cost.

Eco-Challenge, however, was radically different. It still went to exotic, dangerous locations but the key difference was team work. In 2000 it was a 10-day, 300-mile, 24/7 race through the island of Borneo, following ancient native-islander trails, remote rivers, surviving tropical seas. In 1999 it was in the highlands of Patagonia, Argentina, fighting blizzards and trying to keep from falling off sheer mountainsides. The only way to win the paltry \$55,000 (compared to \$1 million on Survivor) was to get all four team members across the finish line of the 10 day race. All teams had to be mixed gender. If a team member got injured, the team was disqualified unless they kept working together, sometimes even carrying the member a couple of days.

The Rules of the Race state: "If a team loses a member due to illness or fatigue, or they can't get along, disagree with how to work together, they are disqualified. Only teams that can work together as friends and equals have any hope of reaching the finish line. Honest communication, compassion, and remaining mission-oriented are essential." Those are not rules we would generally associate with reality shows – communication, compassion, mission. Jesus would add to this: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

The team can only go as fast as its slowest member. Those that try to push ahead will only grow more fatigued and subject to injury. The irritation with each other will break down their ability to work together. We might say again, to whom much is given, much is required. The strongest and fastest will only be of greater value only when using that ability as a servant of the one with the most need. Again: the richest and most powerful will only be of greater value only when using that ability as a servant of the one with the most need. The other cool thing about Eco-Challenge is the nature of the challenges themselves. Instead of who made the biggest profit on the Apprentice, teams on Eco-Challenge had to complete tasks that served the environment. In Utah, the challenges included cleaning up 70 tons of recyclable metals in an illegal dumpsite. In British Columbia, a tributary important to spawning salmon was cleaned. And in Australia, over 1,700 indigenous trees were planted in order to re-forest an eroded river bank. You could only "win" by serving a need. Jesus would add to this: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

Think of this in other contexts. "Great" companies and CEOs seem to be equated with how many employees you can downsize, how you can shed pension obligations to retirees and shift health care for the remaining underpaid workers to Medicaid. Then they're rewarded as a "great" company. Tom's of Maine, in contrast, lists in its statements of beliefs that "We believe our company can be financially successful while behaving in a socially responsible and environmentally sensitive manner." They include in their statement of mission to "respect, value and serve not only our customers but also our coworkers, owners, agents, suppliers and community; to be concerned about and contribute to their well-being." Included in their statement of purpose is their intention to "empower others by sharing our knowledge, time, talents, and profits." They even have what they call a "model of stewardship." Such a company provides me with hope that lessons in greatness *can* be re-interpreted.

Our county often likes to think of itself as the "greatest" in the world. In fact, it often sounds like an argument – my guns are bigger than your guns. But what would truly make the United States the greatest in the world? One would be regarding our own citizens. We can only be as great as the "least" of those who

are my brothers and sisters. In that case, if we want to “great,” you might think that jobs that paying a living wage would be of high priority; if we want to be “great,” you’d think that healthy people would be an asset, through equal access to health care; if we want to be “great,” you might think all kids would have equal opportunities for education – urban, rural and suburban. These might be some powerful qualifications for greatness.

Yet, our “great” nation instead argues about how much torture to allow, how long a fence we can build along the border, and how far we can under fund public education – just enough to placate the suburbs because we don’t care if the cities fall deeper into hell. We’re left arguing about whether gambling casinos will plug the need for jobs instead of addressing the fundamental, and more difficult, issues, such as whether stockholder profits are more important than pride in providing a meaningful way for people to participate in society. And not everyone can get a job in information technology, especially if poor schools can’t afford computers.

And what are the proposed solutions? Banning gay marriage... Working on better insults for the other candidate... Saying as little as possible so you’re not held to any promises. What would Jesus say to the Great State of Ohio, or to our “Great” nation? We have our moments. Americans can be extraordinarily generous. Other countries envy the volunteer involvement and entrepreneurial spirit of our citizens. We have great freedoms, including to speak up and ask questions of our leaders. But we don’t often *want* to ask the difficult questions nor do we relish speaking up. And if we let others do it for us, we shouldn’t be surprised if those with the biggest egos crawl to the top and claim the prize for themselves.

How often do we just not get it, though we’ve heard Jesus a million times? “Who ever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” He said the words, and then he demonstrated their meaning. He took a child and put it in his arms. In his day, as ours, children were the most vulnerable of society. A child can not pull up his own boot straps. A child cannot win the grown-up race the fastest without a team – or village – taking its responsibility to carry it some days. Frankly, the message could not be more clear: Our only claim to greatness is how well we care for the least and most vulnerable – and not just compassionate service but our hands and feet at work for justice. Does that sound like the same old message? We’ve heard it a million times: love kindness, do justice, walk humbly with your God... Does it start to sound like: clean your room, eat your vegetables, don’t hit your sister...? If it were easy for his disciples to understand it, do you think he’d be telling them a second and third time, after which they still didn’t get it?

I think we have a great church. I tell people all the time I serve a great church. Well, let me make some suggestions for how we might better witness to Jesus' definition of greatness.

I should never hear a visitor say that they were not greeted, but it happens. Try this: when you want to run up to a friend with smiles and hugs, see who you have passed by on the way. Stop and greet the stranger first. When we pass the peace of Christ, look first to see who is standing alone and perhaps a little embarrassed to be the one to initiate the greeting. Greet them first, then your friend. If you don't know if someone prefers a hug or a handshake – we all have different boundary needs – ask, "Are a hugger or a shaker?" Except for Virginia and Judy, every one of us has experienced our first day of worship here as a stranger. Moses once famously said, "Remember that once you were a stranger in a strange land." If you were warmly welcomed, as many people attest to, warmly welcome those who come after you. If you were ignored, remember that sting and make sure no one else feels that – and accept the apology of the church for making you feel that way. We are all still learning – like the disciples, we need refresher courses along the way. But don't stop your hospitality: Extend this same awareness after the service, in line, on the steps, in coffee hour. Before you look for the table with your friends, stop, look. Is anyone sitting alone? Don't think someone else will take care of it. Make sure they get a name tag, remember their name, and greet them the next time. We will be a "great" church when no one feels they came here and felt alone. It's not a "great" church because we have a lot of friends here.

We will be a "great" church when no one person feels they are carrying responsibility for something on their own. Find your place in this ministry, and if it isn't obvious, ask, "What can I do." Look around. See what needs to be done. We will be a "great" church when we don't think the pastor will take care of it for us. And I'll be a much better pastor if I stop enabling that. We will be a "great" church when each of us has found a way to be in ministry together with our own unique gifts – serving a larger cause than ourselves. Do we need servers for the community meal? Do we need team members for the AIDS walk? Do we need help with the Recovery House? Do we need teachers? We will be a "great" church when the whole church feels a sense of ownership for our ministries – not to mention responsibility for the financial needs of the church. We will be a "great" church when no task seems too small to be considered an extension of our discipleship.

Most of us here probably don't aspire to be Great. We have no illusions or desire to be "Alexander the Great" or "Jennifer the Great." In fact, we'd probably rather be "David the OK" or "Roxanne the OK." Is that, however, to deflect attention, having smaller ego needs, or is that because we want people to have small expectations of us? "I haven't been given much, so you can't expect much

of me.” But, our playing small serves no one. No matter our abilities, God gave each of us the ability, in some way, to be servant of all. It’s not that we ought to. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are servants. If there is anything that should provide hope for our nation, our state and our church, it is that we are servants in the service of others – we just need to not be afraid to ask a few more questions. What does the Lord require of me?