

We continue our Growth Group Series this morning: Who Do You Say I Am? Today's answer: The Servant of All comes from Mark 9:30-37. I'd like to highlight verse 35 ***If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.***

It is a popular pastime among sportscasters and sports fans these days to argue about who is the G.O.A.T. Now when I was a kid, if there was a sporting event and someone was referred to as the goat, that meant that they were the person being blamed for the loss (kind of like the Old Testament scapegoat that bore the sins of the people away and out into the wilderness to die.) But the idea of a G.O.A.T. in sports today is completely different. Today, when someone refers to the G.O.A.T., they are referring to... The **G**reatest **o**f **A**ll **T**ime – the G.O.A.T.

But this whole “greatest” conversation in sports was made most famous by a young heavyweight prizefighter by the name of Cassius Clay, later to be known as Muhammed Ali. He repeatedly uttered those famous words, “I am the greatest!” Ever since, athletic greatness has become a pursuit, a goal, a motivator, a way of life. Consider this opening to the 2017 Superbowl, remembering Muhammed Ali, who had died in 2016, and pairing his greatness with the so-called greatness of football.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, greatness talk, G.O.A.T. talk, can transcend sports into virtually any area of life. But it seems the most prominent debates are in athletics and people will go round and round in sometimes even heated debates all to determine who is the greatest.

Sounds a bit like the disciples in our text for today, huh? There they were, walking along the road, making their way towards Capernaum, when the G.O.A.T. talk began. I have to admit, it seems so silly and pointless. I mean, from a debate standpoint, couldn't somebody have just said *Jesus/* Jesus is the greatest? Done. But that wasn't the case. Rather, they were trying to determine who was the greatest among *themselves*, among the Twelve disciples.

Again, it seems like such a silly conversation, so pointless. But as we take a closer look at what has transpired since our text from last Sunday, we begin to understand how this conversation started in the first place and, more importantly, how Jesus used it to answer our Series Question: Who Do You Say I Am? And as we consider the answer this morning, please...

As we heard in last week's gospel account (Mark 8:27-35), Jesus is teaching his disciples in earnest. It is imperative that they understand who he is and what he will do. In fact, nearly every interaction Jesus has with his disciples becomes a “teaching moment.” Since last Sunday's account...

- Peter, James, and John have been taken up the Mount of Transfiguration to experience the heavenly glory and divine approval of Jesus' impending passion. (Ooh, special privileges for *three* of the disciples.)
- As they descend the mount, the disciples are told by Jesus to not share what they experienced until after his resurrection. (Exclusive knowledge...pretty great, huh?)
- When they rejoin the remaining disciples, they find that the other 9 are locked in a contentious conversation with the teachers of the law, and in front of a great crowd of people at that. The other 9 had failed to cast out a demon and were defending

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rURPF8C3GyY>

themselves to the teachers of the law.  
(Maybe these others aren't so great...?)

- Jesus expressed frustration with the disciples (and later chides them) even as he casts out the demon for them. (How “great” can you be if you’re being reprimanded by Jesus? Ahem, Peter, get behind me...remember last week?)

But as our text continues today, Jesus and the disciples have moved on from that place, through Galilee and towards Capernaum. As they travelled, Jesus took care to stay away from the crowds in order to have the opportunity to continue teaching his disciples. Jesus is well into his third year of earthly ministry. The time is growing short and, clearly, the disciples still had much to learn.

And so, repetition being the mother of all learning, Jesus returns to a previous lesson, the lesson we heard last Sunday. ***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."***

This is the second time Jesus has told his disciples what will happen, and happen soon. Unlike the previous time, however, Jesus shares the news that, in order for all of this to happen, he would be betrayed. In other words, someone close to him, someone he trusted, someone from among their own number would be the one to start the paschal process.

***But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.*** You see, try as they may, they just didn't get it. Luke (9:45) shares with us the reason: ***"It was hidden from them, so that they did not grasp it, and they were afraid to ask him about it."***

That's where they got stuck – their fear. They *couldn't* understand Jesus words, yet they knew that they *should* understand, or at the very least have the courage to *ask*

Jesus to *explain* his words. But rather than ask Jesus to explain, rather than admit their ignorance to Wisdom personified, perhaps even still embarrassed by the chiding they had just received from Jesus (Mark 9:19), they allowed their fear to paralyze them into inaction. So caught up were they in *themselves* that they missed the point. In the midst of heavenly heights, exciting exorcisms, and perplexing paschal pronouncements, they ignored Jesus' lesson on ultimate service. ♦

How about you? Have you missed it, too, Jesus' lesson on ultimate service? Oh, the disciples, as Luke explained, had full understanding *hidden* from *them*. What is our excuse? How *do* we miss our Savior's gospel imperative, his gospel command to serve as he did?

And it is clear as day. In last week's account Jesus said, ***If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. (Mark 8:34)*** Peter declares, ***To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. (1 Peter 2:21)*** How *do* we miss it? It is so *clear*. Why do we ignore it? It is so *poignant*. What is it that keeps us from doing it when we have the opportunity to serve? It is so *easy*.

But like the disciples (though we have not their excuse), the truth is, we get caught up in our own fears, our own plans, our own wants and desires. My comfort, my ease, my desire to serve *myself* keeps me from the kind of selfless service Paul described to the Galatians: ***You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. (Galatians 5:13)*** ♦

The disciples could not have been better examples of what we all get caught up in, distracted by ourselves, and missing the lesson on what makes for true greatness. They turned their attention from the things

they didn't want to think about the things they did: themselves. From the self-denying service of Jesus they turned to the self-promoting ambition of the world. ***They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?"***<sup>34</sup> ***But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.***

As we harmonize the account from Mark with the other synoptic gospel accounts, we find a number of happenings taking place between verse 32 and verse 33. Allowing for some speculation, here is what has taken place, all which have an impact on the concept of selfless service:

- Matthew, in his account, includes Peter's question about how many times to forgive his brother. It would seem that the arguing on the road maybe led to some hurt feelings, especially on the part of Peter. Perhaps some "teacher's pet" accusations had been thrown around after the seemingly special treatment the chosen three had received on the Mount of Transfiguration.
- This most likely led Peter to leave the other disciples behind. He went to catch up with Jesus who had already gone on ahead of the rest towards Capernaum.
- On Peter's arrival in Capernaum, the temple tax collectors came calling. Jesus knew that, even though he and Peter as children of Abraham were not required to pay the tribute, it would be better for the Kingdom of God to pay the tax and not distract others from Jesus' mission. As you may recall, the coin for the tax eventually would be found in the mouth of a fish.
- Meanwhile, still along the road towards Capernaum, John and the other disciples came across a man who was casting out demons in Jesus' name. John told him to

stop since he was not one of the 12. (We'll talk more about that one next week.)

- Finally, they arrive and all are together once again in Capernaum, most likely in Peter's home.

Jesus, it seems, met the disciples at the door upon their arrival. Still thinking about their "who is the greatest" discussion on the road, Matthew tells us that they flat-out asked Jesus who the greatest was. Jesus, taking them into the house to sit down, responds with a question of his own, "***What were you arguing about on the road?***"

You see, Jesus knew not only what they had been talking about, but more importantly, he knew that they needed to know not the "who" of greatness. No, they need to know the "how" of *true* greatness. And so he asks his searching question, looking for them to not only realize what they have been doing, but more importantly, what they need to know about greatness.

I know, at first glance, "greatness" may seem to be a ridiculous topic of conversation. Professional athletes and job candidates may talk about such things, but most of us despise people who try to make themselves out to be the greatest at anything.

Yet, if put another way, it may resonate more broadly with us. After all, isn't "greatest" just another way of saying "most important?" And so the question begs to be asked, "Who is the greatest, who is the most important in your life?" Is it God? Is it others? We would like to think so. But who tends to win out in my life? Me! Who is most important in my life? Me! Who, then, is the greatest in my mind? Me!

We are not only just like the disciples in our self-aggrandizement, but truth be told, we are daily part of their conversation as we struggle against our sinful, selfish selves. Jesus' question ("What were you arguing about on the road?"), directed at disciples then and now, is not asked for his benefit.

He already knows the answer. No, he asks the searching question for our benefit that we may "...acknowledge our sinfulness and ask him to forgive us."

***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."*** Sadly, the disciples neither seized the opportunity to confess nor grasped the lesson that Jesus was teaching. They needed to talk through it. And so, Jesus sat down with them and, as he so often did in these final days with them, he spoke plainly to them: humble service is true greatness.

And look no further than to Jesus. ♦ For us and for our forgiveness, for our salvation, it was needful for Jesus to do exactly what he said that he would do: suffer and die, to be the ultimate servant carrying out the ultimate service for you and me. And in his service to you and me, we learn of true greatness. Under inspiration, Paul put it all together: ***Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: <sup>6</sup> Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, <sup>7</sup> but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. <sup>8</sup> And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross! <sup>9</sup> Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, <sup>10</sup> that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <sup>11</sup> and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:7-11)***

And if that wasn't enough, then, as Jesus so often did, he used what was around him to further illustrate the point. ***He took a little child*** (perhaps even Peter's son) ***and placed him in their midst. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, <sup>37</sup> "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my***

***name welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me, welcomes not just me but also him who sent me.***" Jesus points to the extraordinary that is to be found in the ordinary. He says to his followers, in serving a child, you serve in greatness, you do what is great in the eyes of God. Alfred Edersheim puts it this way: *Not, to teach, to preach, to work miracles, nor to do great things, but to do the humblest service for Christ's sake – lovingly, earnestly, wholly, self-forgetfully, simply for Christ...*

My friends, true greatness in the Kingdom of God is to be found in service – not serving self but serving others, even as Jesus did – done out of thankfulness for what he has done for us. ♦

- Christ-like service is bearing our crosses for him, even if it costs us our lives. (8:34-48)
- Christ-like service is recognizing glimpses of glory as opportunity for shared understanding and thanksgiving (9:9)
- Christ-like service is seizing opportunities to build others up in the faith (9:24,31)
- Christ-like service is doing what is right not because you have to, but because that is what is best for the Kingdom of God. (Matthew 17:24-27)
- Christ-like service is learning from him, standing with him, sacrificing for him, serving like him, and proclaiming him to all, from the greatest to the least. (9:38-50)

Who do you say I am? This is Jesus, the Servant of All that we may serve like him.

Next Sunday we'll continue with this conversation in Peter's home, beginning with verse 38 of Mark 9 recognizing Jesus as the One who give us purpose. But for now, please join me in prayer...