

Mark 9:30-37

They passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know it; 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." But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."*

Who's the Greatest? - September 19, 2021

Mark 9:30-37

I'm sorry to bring up school again, but since I spend my days working at one, the subject of children is always close to my heart. As some of you may know, I work primarily with children with special needs. Most of my students have behavioral or emotional problems. They are capable of doing grade-level work, but other issues stand in the way of their performing as they might. Invariably, I deal with children who from time to time say the wrong thing, or touch someone in the wrong way, or just get overwhelmed, shutting down and refusing to work for hours at a time.

We all see the potential that is bursting inside them. We all know that when all the stars are aligned they are quite capable. Ironically, we also know that our students are enmeshed in a system which is designed to judge them minutely for every word they say and every action they do — despite being surrounded by so-called “general education” students whose behaviors in some cases are actually worse.

As a result, I and my colleagues find ourselves in a kind of slow attrition war with much of the school. Many “general education” teachers simply don't understand or want to understand our students and are quick to accuse them of all kinds of failings. Somehow, they are skilled at looking the other way at their own kids. The us vs. them battle happens every year. The special education teachers see our students not for how they behave today but for what we believe they can be in the future.

Has it ever occurred to you that perhaps that is the way Jesus looks at all of us? I mean, an unshakable article of our faith is that the God we worship is not off sitting in on a cloud far away, a God who could care less about our individual lives and situations. No, the God we proclaim and worship is a God who know us. God knows you and God know me and I repeat God loves you and God loves me. Right now. Just as who we are. Just as who we are.

How do we know? Well, as Christians, we believe that God personally came to earth to live among us as a human being named Jesus of Nazareth. In Jesus, we have a person, a fellow human being, who understands perfectly about our lives and our situations. Jesus knows the struggles we have experience because he experienced them himself. Remember, Jesus himself was poor, homeless, treated like an outsider, faced all kinds of criticism, taught and healed and transformed people rich and poor and very different from him. Oh yes, Jesus knows what it is like to be a human being. That qualifies him to know you personally and know me personally.

How does that make you feel? Are you disturbed that God knows you? Does it bother you that God knows everything you have done in your life, good and bad?

My question is why should it bother you that God knows you better than you even know yourself? Really. I am a sinner. I have done hundreds, thousands, even millions of things in my life that I should not have done. More importantly, there are many, many ways I could have behaved in different ways, ways that could have made a bigger difference in people's lives. There is no question I have failed God in many, many ways.

There, I'm saying it. I'm confessing it to you, my congregation. I, Robert Higgs, am an imperfect, highly flawed human being who has fallen short of the man I can be.

Perhaps you are able to make the same confession about yourself, if not to others, at least to God. On the other hand, perhaps you are one who says, "Hey, I'm basically OK." Maybe you're like my friend Norman Greenbaum who sang in his song, Spirit in the Sky, "I'm not a sinner, I never sin."

I've got news for you, Norman, you are a sinner and you sin all the time.

Now I'm not trying to go all hell, fire, and brimstone on you. Quite the opposite. I know I'm a sinner. I confess it freely to you. I also know — and this is the heart of the good news — that God in Jesus Christ loves me and accepts me right now, just as I am. So I know that because of my faith in a God who loves me and the grace of a God who forgives and accepts me, I am saved — I am in solidarity with my creator.

Perhaps you really don't care that God loves you. Perhaps it doesn't matter that there is a God who made you and loves you unconditionally right now no matter what you have done. Perhaps at some point in your life you will in fact want desperately to be loved and accepted because at some point you will realize how badly you need to feel affirmed no matter what has happened to you and no matter what you have done.

And that's the point of greatness, isn't it? We Americans are totally amped up on worshipping whatever is great at the moment, aren't we? Whatever or whomever social media defines as being "great" we seem to run toward, like moths being drawn to a flame. What Hollywood star is great? Let's worship him, or her. What social media influencer has the most followers? Let's subscribe to their YouTube channel. What political pundit spits out the views we agree with and rejects the things we don't want to hear? Well, we'll watch that show or podcast and ignore the rest.

In other words, the definition of greatness is not about genuine truth, meaningful truth, foundation-shattering truth. No, we define greatness solely in terms of what makes us feel good at the moment, whether it makes sense or not. If someone says or writes something that I agree with, then they are great! If I don't like it, then turn them off.

And such was the argument Jesus' disciples were having among themselves. Consider who Jesus was and is. Consider the disciples who accompanied him. I mean, really, when you look at the twelve disciples whom Jesus chose, can you really believe Jesus chose the best and the brightest? Some fisherman, a tax collector, a professional rebel, and even a man whom Jesus knew would betray him. What a collection! Some would say a collection of losers.

And yet, and yet, this collection of losers had the nerve to argue among themselves about greatness! I mean really! How could they? Did any of these guys have the faintest idea about what greatness was about? What did any of these disciples do? Yes, they followed Jesus around Galilee and Israel. Yes, they listened to his preaching. Yes, perhaps once or twice they actually shared Jesus' ideas and teachers with other. But really, was anything actually "great" about them? When you have the opportunity to sit down and read the Gospel of Mark from start to finish, you'll find that Mark doesn't think much of these guys. In fact, for much of the Gospel, Mark portrays them as being clueless as to who Jesus is and what he is

about. There is nothing, repeat nothing, in Mark's Gospel that would lead you to believe that any of these guys could possibly carry on the work of Jesus once he returned to God.

Reading the gospel alone gives me a pretty bleak picture of what the future of the church would look like under the leadership of a bunch of knuckleheads like Jesus' 12 disciples.

Fortunately friends, I am not the founder or even the sponsor of the church. I am just one pastor among millions who serve and have served before me. My opinion is meaningless. The fact is that God in Jesus Christ saw much more in this group than I do or even the Gospel writer of Mark did. Jesus saw the potential in his disciples, much like I and my colleagues see the potential in the special education students I work with every day.

The program at the school where I teach is designed to take students from a very young age, kindergarten or first grade, and over the years, up to fifth grade, chip away, little by little, at whatever it is inside of them that is holding them back. Little by little, day by day, we put a bit more polish, scrape off a few barnacles, help children realize that they really do have control over themselves and their lives.

And you know, it works, it really, really works. After six years at my school, I have seen first hand the incredible results of the slow hard work our special education program has accomplished with dozens of children. I have seen boys and girls slowly changed and transformed to become, or at least move closer to what God has made them to be.

My friends, my conclusion is that if it can be done with them, it can also be done with you and with me.

Yes, it should be obvious now why Jesus took a child and showed it to his disciples as the true example of greatness. Children, you see, are vulnerable. Children, unlike so-called adults, are individuals who know perfectly well how much they depend on factors outside their control for their daily existence.

I mean as adults, we have made a habit, we have grown a shell of invulnerability, haven't we? We have become experts at fooling ourselves into thinking we have all the answers, we can solve all of life's problems, don't we?

But, on the other hand, we know deep down the real truth. Whether you are the president or whether you are someone who thinks they're an "average Joe." The truth is that way down deep inside of us is a little, frightened child who doesn't have a clue about what is going on in the world and desperately longs for the comfort of someone who will take care of them.

Children are great, my friends. Children are great because they are not afraid of acknowledging the reality that they need others to survive. There is not a 10 year old who, when pressed, would not admit that they have no idea where their next meal is coming from or how to pay for the roof over their heads or the clothes on their backs. They just know someone else is going to take care of it.

And you know folks, we adults need to remember the lesson that somehow over the years we have forgotten. The truth, the real reality, is that our lives as adults are still as fragile as those of any

child. We may think that everything is OK. We may fool ourselves with nice jobs and pensions and bank accounts that we have the wherewithal to survive anything.

But it's just not true.

We cannot rely on ourselves. We cannot trust our current situations. We have to admit, admit deep down, that on simple phone call, text message, or email can disrupt our lives utterly. And then where will we be?

Yes, you know the answer. When our lives are overturned, as we know they are going to be, to whom will we turn? What is our answer?

Then, then, and only then, will we find ourselves in the position of being little children again. Little children who know for a fact that they don't have all the answers. All the answers? Ha! Not even a single answer.

Then, then, and only then, will we have the opportunity to be great. Because we are great only when we acknowledge, accept, and live in the love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.