

Proper 20B

“Who is the Greatest”

Mark 9:30-37

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Norman, OK
September 19, 2021

Before I became a Deacon, I was the director of Christian Formation here at St. Michael’s. When I would attend diocesan conferences or browse the internet to see what other churches were doing, there were many times that I felt that our formation ministries were feeble and shoddy in comparison. It was like watching Picasso or Van Gogh create this beautiful painting that was a wonder to behold, while I was over here drawing stick figures. I shared this with our priest at the time, Fr. Alan Sutherland. What he told me in response has stuck with me.

He said, “So, we have stick figures. What it looks like isn’t important if it is created with love. Love is what drives our ministries. What they end up looking like, a Picasso or stick figures, doesn’t matter as long as they come from a place of love.”

It was reminder that being a Christian isn’t a competition. Our churches and our ministries aren’t in competition with each other. God calls us to be and to do the best we can, to serve Christ and God’s people in our own way. Our way is not necessarily better or worse than someone else’s or another church’s way of doing something, it is just our way of following the Holy Spirit as she pushes us in a certain direction to serve God’s people.

One barrier to creating works of art is trying to do exactly what someone else is doing. When we worry about painting like Picasso or Van Gogh, we put up a roadblock to the Holy Spirit working through us. Just look at all the styles of painting- cubism, impressionism, modern, renaissance - and this is just a short list. Within in each of these styles there are a lot of different painters. So, who is the greatest painter? It all depends upon your point of view.

Ministry is like that. Lots of different types of ministries with lots of different styles or ways of doing those ministries. Every person is different. Every ministry is different. Even every church is different. That doesn’t make them greater than the other or more important, merely different.

However, there is something about being human that drives us to try to be the best, the greatest. While the fight to be number one is a driving force in American culture, our Gospel reading shows us that the desire to be “king of the mountain” isn’t a new thing. Jesus asks His disciples, “What were you arguing about on the way?” Like kids caught out in doing something that they know they shouldn’t have done, the disciples are silent, because they had been arguing about

who was the greatest. I imagine that Jesus heaved a huge internal sigh at hearing that His disciples' minds were once again set on worldly things. Perhaps, he even experienced some despair, wondering if His disciples would ever understand His message of love and sacrifice that makes us all servants to one another.

When we get wrapped up in the worldly belief that we must be the greatest, the flashiest, the fairest, or the first of all, then we lose sight of Christ's sacrifice and love for us, and we tumble off the path of the way of love that Christ calls us to walk. There is nothing in our Baptismal Covenant about being the greatest. With God's help, we promise to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves. Our covenant with God is all about walking the way of love. St. Michael's own mission statement is that we will live and share the love of Christ.

Jesus didn't try to outdo anyone else by striving to be the greatest. He was the greatest of all because of His sacrificial love for God's children. He worked to love God's people the best way that He knew how to do, using the simple tools at his disposal- a towel to wash His disciples' feet; fish, wine, and bread to feed the hungry, both physically and spiritually.

To those in power, His simplistic approach to changing the lives of people was as baffling as it was infuriating. From their point of view, you can't become great without grandiose gestures, possessing riches, and stepping on people to climb to the top. Yet, here was Jesus, born in a stable, son of a carpenter, living off the generosity of others, and changing the world simply by loving His neighbors as Himself through both words and action. As those in power saw it, it was like they were painting these great works of art that would be admired for ages to come, while Jesus was over there drawing stick figures. But over two thousand years later, it is those stick figures that were drawn with love by a carpenter's son that have survived the test of time and continue to change the world.

Doing ministry, living the life Christ calls us to live, is not about being the greatest, but about love. If we love ourselves enough to believe that we and our ministries are good enough, then everything that flows from that love is good. If our ministry looks like stick figures or seems too simplistic, so what? We are in good company. Loving our neighbors, sharing Christ's light, being willing to be a servant to others, makes us great in the eyes of God.

On that day when the disciples admitted to Jesus that they were arguing about who was the greatest, Jesus reminds them that, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then He took a little child in His arms to make a point about what it means to follow in His footsteps. Jesus could have used several different people to make his point to the disciples- a leper, a widower, a poor person- but he chose a little child. During Jesus' time, in that culture, children didn't count for much. They were valued lower than slaves and considered unimportant and unworthy of attention. Children were seen as helpless, useless, and a waste of time and resources unless they lived long enough to take care of you when you got older. Treating children as an equal, welcoming them- and I don't just mean saying, "Hi, good to see you", but accepting them, cherishing them, honoring them, loving them for being just who they were- well, that was just crazy talk.

But then, much of what we are called to do as Christians seems crazy on the face of it. Living a Christian or Godly life, means working in service to everyone, especially those that our culture tells us are beneath notice or not worth the time or the resources at our disposal- the poor, the hungry, those in prison, the addicts, those who are vulnerable due to mental or physical conditions, the refugees who arrive on our shores with nothing but the clothes on their backs. Greatness comes when we open our arms wide and embrace each other with the same love that Christ embraces us. A love that is sacrificial and one of servitude, so that all God's children can grow and thrive.

The way of love that Christ calls us to walk is like a blank canvas. St. Michael's won't paint that canvas with ministries that look exactly like St. John's, the Cathedral's, or any of the number of churches down the road. The ministries that each of do as individuals will be painted in our own style and with our own way of doing things. Not one is greater than the other. They are all great in their own way to someone, somewhere. We make a difference when we use our talents and skills, whatever they may be, to the best of our ability as God calls us and as the Holy Spirit directs us to do. What is important is that we are willing put the least of us first, letting love lead the way. When we work in service to another child of God, we are looking into the face of Jesus and welcoming God into our hearts and souls.

Amen.