

WHO IS THE GREATEST?
Sermon by William W. Williamson, Jr.

First Presbyterian Church
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Mark 9:30-37

“On the way they had been arguing about which one of them was the greatest.” I guess we can imagine Mohammed Ali in his heyday arguing about being the greatest. But for disciples of Jesus, it is a little hard to picture how they got into such an argument.

After all, Jesus had taught them about denying themselves and losing their lives. So it is hard to imagine that one day, out of the blue, one of them would say: “Hey, let’s decide which one of us is the greatest.” They knew better than that.

Instead, the argument started, as most arguments do, when they were talking about something else:

“Peter, must you always be the one who follows right behind Jesus when we’re walking? You’re kicking up dust and getting our robes all dirty.”

And Peter replies: “Well, it’s important for me to be up front, in case Jesus wants me for something.”

“What makes you think Jesus would want you rather than one of us?”

“Well, it’s obvious that I have become the unofficial spokesman for all of you. Of course Jesus would look to me first.”

“We don’t think it’s so obvious. Who elected you? Are you claiming that you’re greater than the rest of us?” And off they would go arguing about who is the greatest.

Or: “John, the other day when Jesus fed all those people, when it came time to collect the leftover baskets of bread, I noticed that you elbowed your way ahead of me to collect from the people on the front row.”

“Well, Jesus gave me a bigger basket than the rest of you, so I figured he wanted me to collect the bread for the most important people.”

“Oh, yeah. Who died and made you king? You think you’re more important than the rest of us?”

What makes this discussion especially silly is that they are having it on the Way. This is not just any way, not just Palestine county road #202. No, this is the Way, the way to Jerusalem, to Pilate’s trial and the shouts of the crowd, the way to cross and blood and nails and death. This is not a sightseeing trip. This is the way of taking up your cross and following Jesus.

So Jesus asks them: “What were you talking about on the way?” And they fall into an embarrassed silence. Jesus’ question is a spotlight that shines on their empty-headed conversation. On the way they have been talking about who is the greatest. It is exactly the wrong thing.

So let’s put Jesus’ question to us: What have we been talking about on the Way? The Way is not just on Sunday morning when we’re thinking spiritual thoughts. The Way is out there, when we try to live as disciples of Jesus in the ordinary times of our lives. The Way of discipleship is lived when we’re carpooling the kids, or shopping at Wal-Mart, or going to the football game—wherever we live our lives. What have we been talking about on the Way?

Well, of course, we talk about all kinds of things: the shopping list and the latest joke and the phone conversation. Let me ask you this: In any of your conversations, has there been any talk of who is the greatest? Probably the answer is No. At least, there has been none of that bald-faced, undiluted talk that proclaims: “I’m greater than you.”

No, like the disciples, our arguments about greatness usually start in talking about something else:

“She got her picture in the paper and I didn’t, even though, of course, such things don’t matter to me at all, and besides, who does she think she is, getting all the attention like that when I was the one who did all the work.”

“Look at the way that guy sucked up to the boss. I would never do that, even though I have this dump office and everybody puts the extra work on me and I tell ya’ I get no respect.”

As much as it shames me to mention it, not even we clergy are exempt from the greatness game. “He got a call to that new church where everyone is a zillionaire and he gets a huge salary. The guy can’t preach his way out of a paper bag. I’d never sell out like that, even though it means I have to take this sorry church on the boondocks where all the members do is fuss, and it’s obviously beneath my marvelous talents.”

What have you been talking about on the way? Like the disciples, there are times when we are shamed by how far our talk carries us from the kingdom.

So Jesus sits down, calls the twelve to him, and says: “Let’s go over this again. Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all. See this little child? Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

For the disciples and for us, our talk on the Way is to be, not of who is the greatest, but of service. We reach out to children, who in Jesus’ day were not just little in stature but little in status, insignificant, nobodies. To be great, we are to be found not among the celebrities, the powerful, the great, but among the small and powerless. That is where we show true greatness.

How quickly we forget that. Just last week the Tennessean’s Saturday religious page carried an article by a Nashville minister that said that Christianity needs to be the dominant religion.¹ It didn’t seem to occur to him that the words “dominant” and “Christian” don’t belong in the same sentence. Followers of Christ are not about finding greatness in dominance, but about humility and service to the least of these.

¹ Rodney Beard, pastor of Living Word Community Church, “Nation must affirm roots in Christianity and Bible.” *The Tennessean*, September 16, 2006.

Sometimes the world seems to understand that better than the church. In his influential management book *Good to Great*, author Jim Collins looks at the factors that have made some businesses great successes, while others have muddled along in the middle. What made some companies truly great? Collins and his team of researchers investigated successful companies to discover what factors led to their success.

They discovered that one factor was more important than any other, and that was the qualities in the person at the top, the CEO of the company. The very best business leaders, they found, were not hard-charging management celebrities like Jack Welch or Lee Iacocca. These big-time CEO's had what was called the "biggest-dog" syndrome—"they didn't mind other dogs in the kennel, as long as they remained the biggest ones."

But the best leaders were not like that. They were self-effacing, even humble. Other people would describe them with words like:

quiet, modest, reserved, shy, gracious, mild-mannered, self-effacing, did not believe his own clippings. . . . These leaders channel their ego needs away from themselves and into a larger goal. It's not that they have no ego or self-interest. Indeed, they are incredibly ambitious. But their ambition is first and foremost, not for themselves, but for the institution they headed.²

Can Christians learn from the world of business? Can we put aside our desire for greatness, and seek a goal beyond ourselves, the goal of serving in the name of Jesus?

Or think of our nation, the United States of America. What is it that makes our nation great? There is much about this nation that makes it great—its democratic ideals, its commitment to freedom, equality, justice.

Sometimes we confuse that greatness with being number one. "We've got to be the biggest, the strongest, the most dominant." Recently I saw some figures that show that our nation expends more on military spending than the next half-dozen nations combined.³ But we know that while might makes right, it doesn't always make for true greatness. Our stock as a nation is down in many parts of the world, especially in the Islamic world.

² Jim Collins, *Good to Great*. (New York: Harper Business, 2001), pp. 21, 25-26.

³ International Institute for Strategic Studies, Department of Defense. Cited in *The Christian Century*, September 5, 2006, p. 7.

Yet recently a speaker at an international conference said that there are two Islamic countries where our stock is high. The speaker said: “There are two Muslim countries where our standing is better than it was a couple of years ago, and they are both important: one, the largest [is] Indonesia, and the other, the most troublesome, because it’s home to so many Taliban and al-Qaeda sympathizers, is Pakistan.”

I was surprised when I read that—Indonesia and Pakistan? Why are we more popular there? Here’s a clue: the speaker at the conference was Bill Clinton, who with the senior George Bush was appointed by the current President Bush to oversee relief efforts in Indonesia after the terrible tsunami, and in Pakistan after the destruction of the earthquake in that country.

Clinton said that he and former president Bush visited little kids, like the ones Jesus took in his arms.

Part of their therapy, if they had lost their families during the tsunami—was to draw pictures of what they saw. Picture after picture after picture: American military helicopters dropping food, not bombs, dropping ladders to get people out of harm’s way.⁴

We know how to do it—as a nation, a community, as individuals. We just get our egos out of the way and reach out to those on the lowest rung of the ladder. President Harry Truman once said: “You can accomplish anything in life, provided that you do not mind who gets the credit.”⁵

But Jesus put it best: “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”^ϕ

⁴ Bill Clinton, “On America’s image in the world.” Excerpts from The Aspen Ideas Festival. *The Atlantic Monthly*. October 2006, p. 49.

⁵ Collins, p. 17.