

the Greatness of Jesus

Pray.... If you have a Bible, turn with me to Mark 9:30 through ch.10:16...

Do you ever come across a passage of scripture, maybe in your own Bible reading or in a group bible study or on a Sunday morning, and, right away, you think, "*Oh yeah, I know this stuff.*"

But then as you linger on it, you realize that you don't really know it—not in the sense of **living** it... Sure maybe it's in your head – you could recite a fair amount of it to another – **but it hasn't actually worked itself into your hands and desires and day-timers...**

I think that's the case with our text this week. It's one of those portions of the teaching of Jesus that seems so basic and known – **and yet, so rarely lived and seen in action...**

And yet, Jesus' words to us here in Mark 9:30-10:16 **are not trivia** (just info to log away in the back of our heads) **nor** are they **trivial** (unimportant and having no bearing on our lives and world). No, they cut to the core of our calling as Christians – as followers of Jesus. As women and men, called by grace, ***into the life of Jesus...***

So, if you have a bible, and haven't done so already, turn with me to **Mark 9:30-10:16**. (As we often do, we're going to read this bit by bit and I'll unpack it as we go).

[Mark 9:30f] *They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, because he was teaching his disciples. He said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into human hands. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise." But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.*

If you've been journeying with us in Mark's gospel, you'll know that this is only the **second time (ever)** that the disciples have encountered the idea that Jesus is going to die.

Imagine you are one of Jesus' first disciples...

All your life, you've lived in hope for the day of God's Deliverance... That was something every Jew dreamed of and prayed for – because of the promise of God in the Hebrew Scriptures... They dreamed of and prayed for the kingdom to come *in their lifetime*. The rabbi's would often speak this blessing – "*May God's kingdom come in your lifetime*".

So all your life you've hoped and dreamed, *not really expecting it to happen*, but you've hoped and dreamed that the Messiah would come in your lifetime... that you'd actually get to see **God's Kingdom come in power**, to see the brokenness of the world around you restored, to see your the brokenness in you restored (pieced back together), for the sick or crippled to be healed, for immorality to be replaced by righteousness, for oppression to be replaced by justice, and specifically, to see the Romans (who've oppressed your people for so long) **thrown out of power**, to see justice for your people, to see the Temple

returned to its place of honor, and everyone from everywhere streaming to join you in worshipping the One True God—Israel's God—Yahweh. **The God who's blessing is for the world.**

Imagine all your life dreaming of this, **and then**, through a strange and unexpected turn of events, ***you end up invited to become the disciple of a rabbi.*** A rabbi who is gaining quite a reputation as someone through whom God is powerfully at work.

And with every passing day, as you follow this rabbi, you become increasingly convinced that your rabbi could, in fact, be the **Messiah**—the One through whom God will bring the kingdom.

As much as you want to doubt it and hold onto the skeptic in you, everywhere you go, you watch as your rabbi (**Jesus** is his name) does the very things that the scriptures say the Messiah would do...

Everywhere you go, the words of Isaiah 35:5 ring out in your heart, ***"Then the eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy..."***

And you can't get away from it. It's no longer just something you long for. It's happening right before your eyes.

With every passing day, your hope and confidence and excitement are building!!! ***It's actually happening! God has finally sent our Deliverer!!***

And not only this, but **you are a part of His inner circle.** He is about to rise up and take his place of honor, **and you will go with him!!** Your name is going to go down in history alongside of His.

Who knows, maybe one day people will write books about you, preach sermons about you, publish letters you've written or name cathedrals after you!!

Who knows?... Anything's possible at this point!

And then one day as you're walking down the road, Jesus, your rabbi, the one you're now convinced **is** the Messiah, says to you and the others,

"The Son of Man" [which you know now is **Jesus**]...

"The Son of Man is going to be betrayed... delivered into human hands. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise."

What do you do with that? How would you handle that?

If I was one of the disciples, I'd probably respond the same way they did.

They did not understand what he meant. And they didn't ask him about it – because they were afraid.

This talk of his death—and worse, of being betrayed and killed—was so far from how they expected things to play out, that they just pushed it aside, tried to ignore it, to forget about it. They didn't understand what he meant and they didn't want to—it just scared them.

So they pushed it out of their minds and just continued on as though he hadn't said anything. And they went back to the discussion they'd been having (an **argument** in fact).

[verse 33] They came to Capernaum. *When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?" But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.*

How does an argument like that get started? Honestly?

Usually this is the kind of stuff you keep to yourself.

Who knows? Maybe one of them had been keeping a tally of how many healings they'd done, or exorcisms, compared to the others...

"Hey guys, random question. How many healings do you think you've done? Or exorcisms?"

I think I've done 11, and one of them was a legion, so really, that's like 22, right? Maybe more...

And not to make a big deal about it, but, Andrew, I think you've only done 3, and one of them was just an assist, and then yesterday, I hate to bring it up, but you tried and it didn't work".

Wow! That's how you start an argument...

Or maybe John referred to himself as "**the one whom Jesus loved**" just one too many times? That always got on the nerves of the others.

Or maybe it simply grew out of the fact that just days before, in the Transfiguration of Jesus – with Elijah and Moses on the mountain – only Peter, James and John had been invited along. Now obviously, Jesus had his reasons,

but among the disciples, that could have sparked some awkwardness or maybe even some *assumed superiority*... Right?

Whatever the case, as they walked down the road with Jesus that day they'd been arguing – secretly – about who among them was the greatest—each one jockeying for position, trying to prove their pre-eminence...

Why? Again, who knows? Maybe it was for practical reasons. Maybe they just wanted to nail down a pecking order, so that next time some menial task needed to be done, they'd all know who had to do it, or next time they were at a banquet with Jesus, they'd wouldn't have to argue about who would sit beside Jesus—because it would all be decided ahead of time...

Whatever was the case, they all had one thing on their minds in that moment—*greatness... being* the greatest...

Which isn't necessarily a bad thing. I think all of us would consider Jesus a **great man**, would we not? Most of the world would. In more ways than we will ever know, the world was and is better off because of Jesus.

And so in a sense, **if we aspire to be like Him** (which is at the heart of being a Christian) **we are aspiring for greatness**.

And I don't think we need to shy away from this.

Honestly, I think everyone longs on some level to be great.

We want to live **lives of significance**. Lives worthy of **respect**, of **honor**... to have people look back on us and our lives and say, "Oh Janet, she was awesome!" "You remember Tom, what a gift he was!" or "Denise, what an amazing woman!" There's nothing wrong with this.

As long as we define greatness accurately...

Back to v.33, when they arrived at the house, *Jesus asked his disciples, "What were you arguing about on the road?"* No one said anything. They were embarrassed. They knew that something about the spirit of their argument wouldn't resonate with the spirit of Jesus. So they didn't say anything.

And in familiar rabbi-fashion, **Jesus sat down** and called the Twelve to himself. Rabbis were always teaching, but when the rabbi sat, a disciple knew that what they had to say was **especially important**.

So when they'd all settled—*now remember, no one told Jesus what they'd been arguing about*—when they'd all settled, Jesus said to them,

"Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all."

And with those words, Jesus called their bluff and **cut to the core**.

As much as they tried to hide it, Jesus **knew** what they'd been talking about. He knew what they were all after... **greatness**. And that in their minds, this meant being **the greatest** – being the head of the pack, always having a seat

at the head table, being on top, in charge, holding power, position and privilege, being honored and applauded *and served...*

And he didn't rebuke them **for aspiring to greatness**. But he did reject **their definition of greatness**: of what it means to be truly great, of how to measure greatness, and how to pursue it. Cause their way was *not* God's way, and their thoughts *not* God's thoughts. **As often ours are not...**

And in that moment, Jesus invited them to imagine, to grasp, and to pursue **a very different vision of greatness**.

"Anyone who wants to be first," he said, **"must be the very last, and the servant of all..."**

Or as Eugene Peterson renders it in the Message –

"So you want first place? Then take the last place. Be the servant of all."

And with this, **Jesus took a child in his arms...**

Now you might have wondered why I chose such a long portion of Mark's gospel for this morning – beginning with ch.9:30 and **extending all the way to ch.10:16**. And the reason I've done this is because Jesus, or at least Mark, the gospel writer, whom I trust to be inspired by the Spirit, **frames** this whole, subsequent collection of teaching **in a way that we can't ignore it**.

Or at least, that I don't think we are supposed to ignore.

As we've already discussed, our text begins with Jesus's second teaching about **the cross** – that He, their Messiah, will be delivered into the hands of men, killed, and after three days he will rise...

And in the wake of this, as the disciples walk with Jesus from Galilee to Capernaum, they end up in an argument about who among them is the greatest. And Jesus responds by telling them that whoever wants to be first ***must be the very last and the servant of all.***

And then – if we keep reading – we find this seemingly random collection of teachings – about not sowing dissension in the body of Christ, about dealing ruthlessly with the things in our lives that cause us to stumble, and about divorce...

And yet there is something that holds these seemingly disconnected teachings **all together** – that frames them very **powerfully** and **intentionally** – and it's this: ***Jesus taking a child in his arms.***

- *"Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all."*

And then we read – **Mark 9:36-37**...

He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me."

And then again, after these three seemingly **disconnected** teachings, we read in **Mark 10:13-16**...

*People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but **the disciples rebuked them**. When Jesus saw this, he was **indignant**. He said to them, "Let the **little children** come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. **Truly I tell you**, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." And **he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them.***

And if that wasn't enough, **between** these two frames – of Jesus taking a child in his arms – right in the middle of these three teachings of Jesus – we hear Jesus say **(Mark 9:42)**

*"If anyone causes one of **these little ones**—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea."*

Clearly Jesus is speaking in hyperbole. Our life – your life, my life – is worth more to Jesus than one great failure. We know this because of everything else Jesus says and does.

And yet, all this points to a core theme in the heart of Jesus – and a glimpse into the greatness of Jesus. That greatness, according to Jesus, has nothing to do with being associated with the beautiful, the powerful or the exceptional; having the best seat or being served. That may be **greatness** as the world counts it – *but not Jesus!*

No, greatness, according to Jesus, is bound up in and revealed through delighting in, protecting, and blessing the **powerless** – and specifically, here, **children**. People whose favor and presence in our lives does nothing for our worldly rank or status.

Which is why, in the final scene of our text today, when people are bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, **the disciples rebuke them – sent them away**. Convinced that Jesus has better things to do with his time, more important people to be with **than kids**.

And yet, according to Mark's account, **"When Jesus saw this, he was *indignant*."** This is actually the only time in the whole of Mark's gospel that Jesus is described in this way – as **indignant** – moved to anger. Which is telling.

As one scholar points out.

"The object of one's personal indignation reveals a great deal about that person. Jesus displeasure here reveals his compassion and defense of the helpless, vulnerable, and powerless." (306)

This, according to Jesus, is what greatness is all about – ***being the very last and the servant of all***.

Which begs the question for us: **How do you, how do I, how do we measure greatness – and pursue it?**

The greatness of Jesus has nothing to do with being associated with the beautiful, the powerful or the exceptional. The greatness of Jesus is bound up

in and revealed through His shameless delight in, protection of, and blessing of those the world considers insignificant. *Which, in Jesus' day, was exemplified by children.*

And although each of Jesus' teachings here deserve their own message, I want this morning to linger on this less-noticed, but undeniable emphasis – as Jesus seeks to teach his disciples – and us – about greatness – by **taking a child in his arms.**

The disciples were scandalized by this, weren't they? So much so that they rebuked people for bringing their children to Jesus. Clearly, the disciples had a very different vision of greatness and the greatness of Jesus – of who deserved His time and attention, and with that, their time and attention.

So, pause with me on this for a moment – and imagine that **you are that child** that Jesus takes in his arms – embraces and blesses with joy...

[Close your eyes if you need to.]

Imagine yourself in your childhood – maybe 5 or 6. You're on the school ground or playing around your house or neighborhood – and you come around the corner and find Jesus and his disciples... Or maybe Jesus and the disciples come around the corner and find you?

How do you imagine Jesus responds to **you** – to seeing you?

Does He brush past you, hardly noticing you, looking for someone else, **someone** or **something** more important?

Or does He come running over to you – embrace and bless you... with delight?

Now imagine this same event happening **today or this week – to you – at** this stage in your life and journey... You're at work, or home, or out on an errand, and you come around the corner and find Jesus and his disciples... Or maybe Jesus and the disciples come around the corner and find you?

How do you imagine Jesus responds to **you** – to seeing you?

Does He brush past you, hardly noticing you, looking for someone else, **someone**, or **something** more important?

Or does He come running over to you – embrace and bless you... with delight?

When you think of **the greatness of God** and God's posture toward you – do you find yourself warmed, lifted, and humbled by the vision of a God who runs to embrace and bless you – regardless of anything you've done or could offer him?

Or do you find yourself nervous and timid before a God who stands back and waits for you to earn his attention, affection and favor?

Because, friends, this latter vision is not one we learn from Jesus, is it?

And He is the revelation of God to us – isn't He?

I say all this because this is at the heart of it all. That *the greatness of Jesus revealed in a life of humble service of others* becomes real in our lives not simply through hearing and knowing the instruction of Jesus, but through ***experiencing for ourselves the undeserved embrace and blessing of Jesus – regardless of anything we've done or can offer Him.***

Makes me think of a story my friend Steve loves to tell – and I love to hear. I've heard it so many times.

Steve is a leader of a vibrant and wonderful Christian leadership development organization – in fact, Steve spoke here on my commissioning Sunday. And because of his role, his days are packed with significant people to connect with and vital decision to make. But when his son was little, every morning, he'd start the day by having breakfast together with his son, Luke.

It was a time they cherished – both Steve and his son.

But, in his book, *Leading Me*, **Steve tells the story of...**

"One particular morning, I had an early appointment at the office, plus I needed to put out the garbage before I left. So, in order to get the garbage out and still be on time for my appointment, I decided that I would break our breakfast routine and let Luke sleep in.

The plan was working. I quietly had breakfast on my own and then tiptoed out of the house without waking Luke. As I was carrying the garbage cans to the curb, I heard the front door open, followed by crying. It was Luke. He

had woken up and figured out that I was gone. He was now standing at the front doors in tears, wondering why I have left without having breakfast with him.

At the sound of Luke's crying, my heart broke, and I dropped the garbage pails. I ran toward him, picked him up and embraced him. Then I took him into the house, and though it would make me late for my appointment I made Luke breakfast.

When I eventually made the drive to work, I began to reflect on what had happened. It was as if God was saying, "Steve, you know how you ran to Luke and embraced him when you heard him crying by the front door? Well, your father's heart of love for Luke gives you just a taste of my Father's heart of love for you." (Leading Me, Steve Brown)

The Father's heart that we see in Jesus here – *taking a child in his arms* – showing us the greatness of God – *a God so great* that He runs in love to embrace and bless those who have nothing to offer him. Which includes **us – me – you...**

And because of this, He invites us to the same...

And in case, we think this is just an individual call, between these glimpses of Jesus taking a child in his arms, Jesus' teaching explicitly names two communities in which this embrace is to be made known... Two communities that God intends to be **the very arms of Jesus** to little ones – the church and the family. And yet, as his teaching points out with honesty, how often does our church life and marriage or family life end up out of sync with Jesus in ways that rather than embracing and blessing children, brings wounds in their lives (as well as in our own lives).

Which, in truth, is hard to hear – and yet is another reason why I'm thankful that this teaching comes in the context of Jesus' announcement of **the cross** – because, as confusing as it was for the disciples in that moment, the self-sacrifice of Jesus is ultimately the greatest gift of grace for men and women, families and churches like us. That despite our sin and failures, including in our church life and families, **Jesus' arms never fail us.**

After all our sin and failures, even in our sin and failure, **Jesus is still the one who takes us in his arms – embracing and blessing us – with delight.** Fiercely refusing any who suggest otherwise.

And who, in his death on the cross, has taken both our sin and our wounds to the grave – that in Him, we might experience the forgiving, restoring and reconciling **arms of God**, and be drawn into God's embrace and blessing of others. To be drawn **into the life of Jesus** – *the Arms of Jesus to others...*

So, how does this happen? How can we follow Jesus *into the life of Jesus* – and become a servant of all? Well, **2 things**. Not 2 ways, but two things that come together to form the way.

One. It means deny ourselves, putting to death our desire to be served by **following Jesus in real service of others**—inviting God to transform our hearts as we do this... Maybe in this, **if you have a child or a niece or nephew, to**

embrace a child – literally. To put down your "*all so important matters*" and spend some real time being led by a child into the magical world of fort-making, building blocks or crayons... Maybe it's time to sign up to help in kid's ministry – *for the sake of your own soul* (and I mean that)...

I don't know what it needs to look like for you, but it needs to look like something. For Jesus it meant embracing a child, for you it may be something else – but whatever it is, this isn't as much about sacrifice, as it is about participating with Jesus in something He loves, valuing someone He values, honoring someone He honors. Letting the joy of Jesus lead us forward...

And all the while praying – *God, fill me with your heart for this person – that I would see them, delight in them and love them as you do...*"

And **second**, with this, this means following Jesus into the embrace of **the Father – to know the Father's heart**. This is what shaped and nourished Jesus. This is what led **Him** to offer up His life as a servant of all—His intimate experience of the Father's love. And this is what will transform us—experiencing the Father's love for us and for others, surrendering our lives to His love (for us and for others) and then just following His love for us and for others – following the One who is the Servant of all...

For God's glory, for the sake of the world, and our joy in Him...

Let's pray...

→ *Invitation to the Cross of Christ...*