



## Pentecost 18 – Proper 20 (B)

### Greatness

**[RCL]: Wisdom of Solomon 1:16-2:1, 12-22 or Jeremiah 11:18-20; Psalm 54; James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37**

*Note: During the 2024 Season after Pentecost, Sermons That Work will use Track 2 readings for sermons and Bible studies. Please consult our archives for many additional Track 1 resources from prior years.*

*O God, the light of the minds which know you, the joy of the hearts which love you, the strength of the wills which try to serve you: Grant us to know you so as to love you, to love you so as to serve you, in whose service is perfect freedom. And since you have called all of us to your service, make us worthy of the calling and empower us for this service. Amen.*

We live in a society that places weight on one's position and status in relationship to others. Too often, a hierarchy of value is assigned to an individual's, a family's, a neighborhood's, sometimes even a congregation's economic, social, or political determinants. The value of one's social location according to these coordinates often determines whether one is considered below par, mediocre, or great. The feelings associated with our social location are too often manipulated to animate and reinforce systems and policies that foster separation and alienation.

Against this backdrop, the response of Christians to the question of what defines the individual or collective is pivotal. We prayed earlier that God would help us to “not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure.” But how do we do that in this world where everything is rapidly changing, with social media streams feeding us images and reports that pump anxiety in earthly things through our veins? In this time of war between Ukraine and Russia, and wars involving Israel, Hamas, and Hezbollah, where do we find our center? With aggressive campaigning and upcoming presidential elections, what is the standard against which we understand the difference between a crooked way and a straighter or narrower way? How do we expand our moral imagination?

The invitation extended to Christians is to look to scripture and the teachings of Christ. And then, we must move forward in a Gospel-centered way to live out our Baptismal Covenant. If being a Christian is part of our life and not just something set aside, then we must integrate it into the core of our way of experiencing

the world around us. It has something important to tell us about how we make choices and how we behave.

In looking at today's Gospel lesson from Mark, we are confronted with the story of Jesus' disciples grappling with the question of greatness. Having just heard Jesus speak about what is referred to as the second passion prediction, they are afraid of the implications of his impending death. The version of the story in Mark tells us that the disciples did not understand what Jesus was saying. The author of the Gospel of Matthew writes in his rendition, "They were greatly distressed." All of this suggests that they were in a heavy state of mind indeed. Raquel S. Lettsome asserts that it's possible the disciples were discussing ways of being in a better position within the existing structures of society rather than working to transform it. She writes, "They want to be benefactors[,] not the backs upon which others benefit. So, they begin to talk about greatness." While we are not sure of the motivation for their conversation, we do know that Jesus enters the conversation to teach an alternative standard for measuring greatness. The Gospel tells us, "He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.'" There are many ways to serve and be of service. What does being a servant of all look like? How do we embody being "last of all and servant of all?" Jesus gives us the answer as he continues instructing his disciples.

He further animates their imagination by calling on them to place themselves in the situation of a child. "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.'"

In defining greatness through this living example of a child, Jesus is providing the disciples with three valuable lessons about walking the Way of Love. First, we learn the importance of changing oneself to serve. It is not enough to remain your old self. Rather, you must change and become like a child. The parallel text in Matthew tells us, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." Here, we find that Jesus' definition of greatness requires a transformation grounded in humbleness. Not just humility, but the humbleness of a child.

Secondly, we learn how to live out the humbleness in communal or organized life. Walter Wink suggests in his text, "Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination", that Jesus uses the example of children not as an "invitation to innocence and naivete but a challenge to relinquish all claims of power and domination over others." This was a profound shift in the societal context of the disciples. It is equally provocative for these contemporary times. Appeals to greatness that reinforce domination and dominion over others run counter to Jesus' teaching and example. Wink asserts that Jesus is prodding his followers to critique and challenge family and kinship structures so that they promote caring treatment of one another. He writes, "Failure to transcend patriarchal kinship systems is making democracy impossible in many parts of the world, because as families are structured, so is the state. The

goal is not the eradication of kinship ties, but their transformation into a nonpatriarchal community of mutuality and love. As such, families can become exemplary of the new family of Jesus.”

Lastly, Jesus’ invocation of the children as the example of greatness reinforces the inherent value of children and other people who are most vulnerable, least seen, and unheard. The context of Jesus’ world and ours continues to warrant valuing actual children. His embodied word to the disciples serves as a clear example of Jesus underscoring integrating actual children as full members of the community. The church must interrogate what this means for its mission of justice, peace, and renewal around addressing children’s poverty, the quality of education for all children, children’s healthcare, and their overall flourishing. What does it mean to proclaim Jesus’ good news - “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me” – if the church fails to meet the concrete needs of actual children?

It is in changing ourselves to be like children and embracing Jesus’ invitation to be the “last of all and servant of all” that we live into a Christ-centered greatness. Embodying a way of thinking grounded in the power of love and service provides us with the path for resisting worldly appeals centered on domination and dominion. Our times invite us to also reorient the compass of our lives, and, in doing so, reimagine our understanding of “true north” toward service.

May we integrate the words of Jesus into our lives and choose a definition of greatness centered on Christ-like service in the world. Amen.

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