

Proper 20 B 2018
September 23, 2018 :: Mark 9:30-37
Fr. Jim Cook

“Last, and Servant, of All.”

All of the clergy I’ve talked to recently, when they were trying to decide which of our four readings to preach on, none of them wanted anything to do with our reading from Proverbs. And I don’t know why. Because it’s a fabulous, ancient text that finally — and surprisingly for that culture — gives hard-working women their due. And so I did consider that reading, but in the end the only thing I could think of to say about it was this: “Women rule. Men suck. Amen.” (And maybe that would have been enough.)

Anyway, since I preached on James last week, and I believe I’ve preached on Psalm 1 in the not-too-distant past, that left me with the gospel; a text that challenges our notions of “greatness.”

If the first part of that reading sounds familiar, there’s a reason. In last week’s gospel, Jesus predicted his betrayal, death, and resurrection. If you recall, Peter rejected that prediction, only to be told by Jesus to back off. Well, in today’s gospel reading, Jesus *again* predicts his betrayal, death, and resurrection. But this time he received only a stunned silence from his disciples. And

even though this is the second time for Jesus to make that exact prediction, his disciples either don't understand what he is saying, or they don't dare believe what Jesus is saying.

But this is actually a pretty common theme throughout all of the Gospels; time and time again, Jesus says or does things that are pretty remarkable, but his followers seem to be pretty clueless about what it all means. And even in today's gospel, they are pretty clueless about the topic of greatness. Or, at least, Jesus seems to think so.

Because, in the second part of that reading, Jesus has caught them bickering amongst themselves, as they walked from one town to another. And so he asks them, "What were you arguing about on the way." Too embarrassed to admit that they were arguing about which one of them was the greatest, they remain silent.

Maybe they were boasting amongst themselves about who had spent the most time with Jesus. Or maybe about which of them had witnessed the greatest miracle. Or, even, which of them might have had *performed* the greatest miracle. We just don't

know. But what we do know, is that Jesus *was not impressed*. And so he tells them, “Whoever wants to be first” — that is, whoever wants to be the greatest — “must be last of all and servant of all.”

And even though this probably wasn't as sharp a rebuke as that which Jesus made to Peter last week — “Get behind me, Satan!” — I'm sure it still stung. Because this is definitely not what they had been taught while growing up. And, let's face it, it's not what most of us were taught either.

I think it's safe to say that we've been taught that greatness suggests power, accomplishment, fame, wealth, and all of the other things that allow us to do things, to influence people, to make things go our way. But that's not what Jesus says. And to drive his point home, he scoops up a young child into his arms, and tells them that whoever welcomes a child welcomes him.

And all of a sudden, at least from the point of view of the disciples, Jesus has gone from saying something that's just a bit off — like, to be first you have to be last — to saying something that sounds kinda crazy. Because, remember, in the first-century, children were of no account. Oh, sure, their parents loved them,

but they had no rights, no influence, no standing. They were utterly dependent, utterly vulnerable, utterly powerless. So, how in the world could giving regard to a child count as greatness? I know, it's nuts!

Or is it?

Think about it for a minute: What if Jesus is right? I mean, what if we imagined that greatness *wasn't* about power, and wealth, and fame, and all the rest; but instead, we started measuring greatness by how much we share with others, or by how much we take care of others, or by how much we love others, or by how much we serve others. I mean, what kind of world would we live in then? Can you imagine if people were regularly trying to out-do each other in their deeds of kindness and service? Or if there were nationally broadcast competitions to see who was willing to be last so that others could go first? If there were reality TV shows that followed people around as they tried to help as many people as possible?

What kind of world would we live in? I don't know about you, but I think it would be a pretty great world.

This definition of greatness, which Jesus is offering us, seems crazy initially, because it is so completely, and utterly counter-cultural. He calls us to imagine that true greatness lies in service, by taking care of those who are most vulnerable — those with little influence or power, those the culture is most likely to ignore.

This gospel reading certainly offers us a renewed vision for our common life as a congregation. But it can also apply to each of us individually. For example: Do we measure our own personal success, or our own personal greatness, by what we take in, or by what we give away? By the influence we wield, or by the service we offer? By accumulating more, or by sharing what we already have? By striving to be first, or by striving to help others move ahead?

Make no mistake: This is hard stuff, and absolutely counter to what the culture is telling us — whether in the first century or the twenty-first. And so, if it was a hard message for the disciples to hear, it's going to be hard for us as well. And if the people who knew Jesus best, missed the point he was making about true greatness, and so fell into the trap of putting themselves — their needs, their goals, their ambitions — ahead of everyone else's, of course it's going to happen to us as well: trusting less in God for

our security than we do our wealth; shutting others out rather than inviting them in; seeking our own welfare rather than that of those around us.

But here's the thing: The road, in our gospel reading, that Jesus and his disciples are traveling along? It's the road to Jerusalem. And so, even as his disciples are misunderstanding him, or refusing to believe him, or just flat ignoring him, Jesus is heading to Jerusalem, and to the cross, willingly in order to sacrifice everything for them ... and for us.

While reflecting on our gospel reading in particular, and the ministry of Jesus in general, one preacher recalled three short prayers that one might offer when confronted with the demands of being the people of God.

The first prayer could be in response to Jesus' counter-cultural command that the first must be last, and that true greatness lies in service. It's a prayer as short as it is simple: "Lord, help me."

The second prayer could be used when we fall short of our ideals, giving in to insecurity and fear, and begin looking out for ourselves first, and it's: "Lord, have mercy."

And the third prayer could be used when we realize that — even though we may have fallen short — that Jesus still loves us, blemishes and shortcomings notwithstanding, and it's this: "Thanks be to God."

For Jesus never gave up on his followers — not then, and certainly not now — and still offers us this new vision of greatness that can inspire us to work toward a renewed world.

So hear Jesus' words once again, and know that they are still as vibrant and alive, still as life-giving and hope-filled, today as they were when Jesus first uttered them. As St. Mark writes,

"[Jesus] sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.'"

And perhaps all that we can say in response is,

Lord help us.

Lord have mercy.

And then

Thanks be to God.

Amen.