

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

Sermon at Grace Lutheran Church and School

River Forest, IL

September 21, 2024

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Mark 9: 30-37

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

“Who is the greatest among us?” This was the argument the disciples were having on their way to Capernaum.

It seems the disciples had entirely missed the point, or at least were very confused about the core message of Jesus’ teachings. They, close companions and confidantes of Jesus of Nazareth, were arguing as if Jesus were merely one of today’s political leaders—huge one day, old news the next. They were talking as if their teacher needed a sole successor to carry on his agenda into the next administration. Their fear about who would be the greatest among them shows they still feared that Jesus’ teachings would be religiously or politically brought down, at any moment.

“Who is the greatest among us?” Greatness, in the eyes of the world, is assigned to those who do great deeds. It is a word reserved for those with power and influence in politics or in history. Greatness in the kingdom of God, however, has nothing to do with possession of political power or human influence. Greatness in the kingdom of God is only about righteousness gained through love of God and neighbor, and therefore it is open to all.

In ancient Mediterranean society, “Greatness” could be attained through the acquisition of honor, and honor rested on three pillars: Wealth, purity, and humility.

Wealth, as it was understood at the time, was about acquisition of land.

Purity pertained to being clean or unclean—which, it is important to note, required a certain level of economic means and livelihood to maintain.

And humility—well, humility required everyone knowing their place and role in society, and staying there.

These were the values that people in the time of the writing of Mark's Gospel would have understood. This includes the governing class (high priests, elders, members of the Sanhedrin, and of course Pilate and others) as well as the retainer class, consisting of the scribes, Pharisees, and Herodians. The disciples of Jesus did not belong to these classes, but they also fell into the trap of wanting to achieve so-called "greatness".

This is not the first time Jesus' companions had posed this question of greatness. James and John were among the first disciples Jesus called to follow. Along with Peter, they formed the inner circle of Jesus' followers. It is not surprising that they would have felt a certain seniority or "pride of place" in the apostolic band. However, their self-centered approach to leadership in this situation triggered an angry reaction from the other disciples (Mark 10:35-35-37, 41-45) It appeared to be an end run around others, an attempted power struggle or power grab. Perhaps the unfairness of it angered them. Perhaps they wanted those prized positions themselves! Or maybe all of these things were true.

Indeed, this was not the first time, nor the last, that followers of Jesus would wonder about the question of "greatness". This was not the first time, nor the last, that Christians would argue about who is righteous, who is just, who speaks truth, who is on the right side of history.

C.S. Lewis wrote: "Ambition! We must be careful what we mean by it. If it means the desire to get ahead of other people, then it is bad. If it means simply wanting to do a thing well, then it is good. It isn't wrong for an actor to want to act their part as well as it can possibly be acted, but the wish to have their name in bigger type than the other actors is the bad one."

How can we consider this today? Where do we see this desire for greatness played out among Christian churches today? As a Palestinian Christian, I will remind you that we have very long memories. For example, I might want to talk

with you about the split of 1054 between the Eastern and Western churches, which was all about authority and greatness. Thank God that today, because of the ecumenical movement, we talk about the closing of this chasm and may speak reverently on “Unity in Reconciled Diversity.”

Still, when I visited the Vigoland Park in the middle of Oslo, Norway, I was struck by a sculpture which depicts a great many people pulling the leg of another, each trying to take their place as the greatest of all. Isn't this the reality in our world once again, at this very moment? Isn't this struggle for greatness the human sin causing so much pain in this country as you prepare for a critical election, and in Ukraine and Russia who are at war for a third year, and of course in my homeland?

Lord, we want to know: Who is the greatest among nations? Whose theology, whose politics, whose ideology, whose land, whose people is loved most?

Instead of arguing, wouldn't it be something if we instead asked about the greatness of our love? What if we desired to be great in the welcome we offer refugees, or the greatness of understanding we offer to those who are not like us? Wouldn't it be something if we worried less about who is likely to be elected and more about who is likely to be able to sleep in safety and wake in the morning?

And still, we know the reality: human sinfulness will continue to nudge us toward division. We, like the disciples, will somehow always hope to be on top. We will always desire to be the ones who can celebrate a victory.

However, the only victory is the one that comes when the love of God wins over hatred, and kindness over fear. King Solomon said, “Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people”. (Proverbs 14:34)

As you know, I come from a war zone. Our region has for a long time suffered a lack of human rights, violence and counterviolence, revenge and counter-revenge.

I am tired.

I am tired of the propaganda machine that demonizes other people and nations.

I am tired of hatred and bloodshed.

Our Holy Land is today stricken by the sin of violence, the sin of hatred, the sin of war, the sin of dehumanization, the sin of oppression, the sin of occupation and the sin of denying human rights to other humans. Amid this sin and the tragedy that results, the Church is called to speak a word. It must be a word that champions freedom, promotes responsibility, encourages justice, inspires hope, makes room for mercy and calls for accountability.

As a Palestinian, I cry to you from Jerusalem:

- enough of violence and killing of human lives that are created in God's image
- enough of hatred
- enough of dehumanization
- enough of using religion for political agendas
- enough of violence
- enough of illegal Israeli occupation
- enough of bloodshed
- enough of war

We are people of life; we are never people of death. This is the reason, God meant that every human being whatever is their nationality, religion or race must enjoy God's given life with dignity, including full human rights.

I always believed in a peaceful non-violent struggle. There will be a time when those who lead wars will be forgotten by history, but that peaceful, nonviolent believers will be written in the history books. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Bishop Zephania Kameeta from Namibia, Bishop Manas Buthelezi, Dorothy Day,

Mother Teresa, Archbishop Romero and many others challenged injustice, racial discrimination, and colonialism with the power of the word. I have always believed in a peaceful, nonviolent struggle for justice.

They spoke truth to power and have given a true vision for justice, peace, living together, harmony, equity, and reconciliation. They interpreted the teachings of religious tradition to promote love of the neighbor, even going as far to love the neighbor by protecting their human rights. While those in power were disturbed, these leaders guided their people in times of injustice and wars to see that peace based on justice is stronger than any war, oppression, racial discrimination or violence.

The war in Gaza has finally exposed to the world the terrible reality of life in Palestine and Israel. It has exposed the double standard of how world powers implement human rights for some and not others. It has revealed how leaders are interested in their own narrow national interests, elections and arm sale but not in providing justice for Palestine and Israel.

“Who is the greatest among us?” This age-old question is the one the authorities are asking, rather than “How can we promote justice, peace, security, and a future for all people?”

I am an Arab Palestinian, and God gifted me equal humanity and equal dignity, the same as any other human being. Isn't the role of world powers—including the United States—to ensure I can enjoy these God-given gifts? Isn't it the role of leaders to demand that I receive the justice and national rights they desire for themselves?

The one who wants to be great will achieve that goal when every nation lives in peace based on justice. Please, we ask you: do everything you can so that our children and grandchildren would have the dignity you want for your own children and grandchildren. The ongoing Israeli occupation and this current war have caused many Palestinian Christians to emigrate. We are today one percent of the total population. What will the Holy Land be without Christians, who have lived for 2,000 years in their motherland, the birthplace of Jesus?

Dear sisters and brothers, as bleak as this situation is today, I continue to preach and teach and work for the same message as always, the message I received from the crucified and risen One. I continue to believe in the inevitability of peace based on justice, and reconciliation based on forgiveness, for Israelis and Palestinians, for Jews, Muslims, Christians, and all of my neighbors. I will not stop! But we also need your prayers, your support, and your advocacy.

“Who is the greatest?” Jesus turned this argument between his disciples into a teachable moment. He taught them the true meaning of greatness in God’s kingdom. He addressed their underlying pride and self-serving attitudes. The great ones of the earthly kingdom are noted for exalting themselves and exercising domination, power, and control over others. But Jesus not only taught but demonstrated that greatness on God’s kingdom does not work that way.

God’s kingdom is an upside-down kingdom, and that upside-down nature is seen best in matters of power and leadership. Jesus said, “Whoever wants to be first must be least of all and servant of all.” (Mark 9:35) Therefore as Christians we are freed from the struggle to be stronger, or better armed, or more ready for battle. Instead, we are freed to serve, to love, and to protect not only our families and friends, but even the stranger and the enemy.

Jesus goes on to reinforce this point by saying that His own life and ministry are devoted to others and not Himself. This is obvious in His feeding the hungry, healing the sick, delivering the demonized, raising the dead, teaching the multitudes and caring for His disciples. Jesus was the embodiment of service—and now we, the church, are His body. We are called and empowered through His death and resurrection to continue as servants to the world.

Our brother Martin Luther taught us, “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.” This teaching came from the Apostle Paul, who put it this way in the first letter to the Corinthians: “For though I am free from all, I have made myself a slave to all.” (1 Corinthians 9:19) And again, “Owe no one anything, except to love one another.” (Romans 13:8)

Who is the greatest? The one who loves. The one who uses their one life to protect the lives of others. The one who serves. Greatness, in the kingdom of God, is not selfish or egocentric or self-protecting, but rather a looking outward, a looking toward others and their suffering. This is the greatness that Christ, through His love for us, has freed us to seek. Through His self-emptying love on the cross, Christ freed us from all works, and now we may take this liberty to empty ourselves for the sake of others.

Dear brothers and sisters, I pray that you will receive the gifts of forgiveness, grace, and freedom today, and then live into that freedom for the sake of others. Especially at this time I pray that this love will lead you into acts of great love, great kindness, and great courage, for the sake of those who live under the shadow of war, violence, and injustice. “For what does Lord require of you but to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8)

May the peace of Christ that passes all understanding keep your hearts and mind in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.