

The 17th Sunday after Pentecost: Holy Trinity Church, September 19, 2021

Proper 20: Mark 9:30-37

Preached

By

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN.

Would you consider yourself a competitive person? Or maybe I should ask, in what area are you most competitive? Humans are naturally competitive. We like to have an edge over those around us.

I knew a young competitive man who was a pre-med student at a very competitive college working hard to get into a competitive Medical School. After four years of high school and two years college of studying days, nights and weekends; dying with every quiz and test competing for that 4.0 GPA to get into a good Medical School. The summer before his junior year, the man took a summer break from his summer studies. The competing against others in his class was poisoning his soul. He was exhausted. He stopped and went to a retreat center. After two weeks of silence and spiritual direction, this very ambitious pre-med student called his parents and told them he was dropping out. A few months later, he explained his decision to his parents and his new way of life. His letter began: “Dear Mom and Dad, I know you weren’t happy

about my decision, but I want to tell you how it has changed me. For the first time in my life, I'm at peace. My soul is in peace. There is no competing.

There is no trying to get ahead of anyone. So, the young man enlisted in the Navy and went off to boot camp. His proud parents were there in Waukegan, Illinois when he graduated boot camp, and they knew their son made a very good decision. After six months, his way of life at sea was so much in harmony with his soul he finally found his inner peace.

You know my sisters and brothers, it's not so easy giving up the need to compete, is it? There are big rewards for competition in our culture. There is status, promotions, paychecks, and bragging rights. But, what does competition do to our soul? I think it depends on the motivation behind the competition.

I saw a story written by a woman in *Reader's Digest* about her husband's recent golf game. Her four-year-old daughter greeted her husband at the door by asking, "Daddy, who won the golf game? You or Uncle Richie?" "Uncle Richie and I don't play golf to win," he said. "We just play to have fun." Without hesitation, the little girl asked, "Okay, Daddy, who had more fun?" Even little kids learn to keep score. Even little kids learn that life is about winning. But if someone wins, then someone else loses. If someone is first, then

someone else is second and third and last. In our culture, we often base our identity and self-worth on whether we are “winning.” We judge our value as human beings on how close we are to being “Number 1.” But someone is always going to outrun us, outrank us, out-perform us. The greatest athlete on earth may have a lousy marriage. The richest person in the world may be in poor health. Someone always has something we want. The competition never ends. Of course, Jesus understands our need to compete. God understands our desire to be the greatest. Fear and pride drive us to put our needs first, and to compare ourselves to others. But fear and pride are cannibalistic urges. They may drive us to achieve great things, but they also steal away the joy of achievement, and drive us further away from God and from others.

Remember Jesus’ words in John 10:10 where he said that he has come to give us a more abundant life? When Jesus confronted his disciples in this gospel from Mark, he wasn’t trying to shame them. He was trying to open their minds to the abundant life God had made them.

And that brings us to our Gospel reading today. I love how Jesus, who has the infinite knowledge of God, asks questions of us. He doesn’t ask because he is ignorant. Jesus asks us questions, so we will be honest with ourselves.

Sometimes when you say something out loud, you realize how crazy it is. So, Jesus asked his disciples, “What were you arguing about on the road? But

they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.”

That’s hilarious, isn’t it? The disciples had seen Jesus feed a crowd of thousands, heal the sick and disabled, and heal a boy who was possessed by a demon. And yet, they were arguing over which of them was the greatest in the group. That’s like bragging to a famous chef that you finally learned how to make peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Or telling a Navy SEAL that you fought off an attack from an aggressive butterfly on your nature walk.

If I’d been Jesus, I would have laughed and laughed. Maybe I would have asked the disciples to explain their criteria for greatness. But Jesus didn’t waste time with that. Our Gospel reading from Mark tells us the following, *“Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, ‘Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.’ Jesus 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.’”*

One of the most popular movies in American culture is *The Wizard of Oz*, which came out in theaters in 1939. One of the most popular lines from the movie occurs right after the main character, Dorothy, and her little dog Toto

have been caught up in a tornado. The tornado tears them out of their tiny Kansas farm and lands them in the magical, mythical land of Oz. As Dorothy stares in amazement at the strange and beautiful new world around them, she blurts out, “Toto, I have a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore.” This line has become one of the movie’s most quoted lines because it’s such a great, understated way of saying, “WAKE UP! You are in a brand-new world, and the old rules don’t apply here anymore.”

That’s exactly what Jesus is saying to you and me in Mark’s Gospel for this morning: “You’re not in Kansas anymore! The old rules about status and honor and greatness that matter in our culture don’t matter in the Kingdom of God.”

It doesn’t matter how our culture defines “greatness.” According to Jesus, the first rule for greatness is to go where The Greatest would go. Jesus is the Almighty God, the Great I AM, the Alpha and the Omega in the flesh. And he gave all that up to be born into a poor family in a little village. He gave all that up to become a carpenter. He gave all that up to spend his time working with fishermen, and eating and drinking with sinners, and healing the sick and disabled. He gave all that up to suffer an unimaginably painful and humiliating death to save us from the penalty of our sins and restore us to

God. So, my sisters and brother, where would Jesus go for us? The real question is “Where *wouldn’t* he go for us?” He went from the glory of heaven to the agony of the cross to show us how much God loves us. If you really want to be the greatest, Jesus says, then go where The Greatest would go.

Many years ago, an eleven-year-old boy named Trevor Ferrell saw a news report on the problem of homelessness in Philadelphia, his hometown. Trevor was so concerned about the idea of people sleeping on the street that he convinced his parents to gather up as many spare blankets as possible from their home and drive him into downtown Philadelphia. And then this young boy walked up to the first homeless person he saw and offered them a blanket. Trevor walked up and down those streets handing out blankets until he ran out. And this was just the beginning of Trevor’s mission. He convinced his parents to collect bags full of clothes and make dozens of peanut butter sandwiches to donate to the homeless folks downtown. Someone heard of Trevor’s mission, and they donated a van and volunteers toward his efforts. Soon, national television news programs began interviewing him. Why would an eleven-year-old kid from a wealthy suburb spend his evenings and weekends making food and collecting blankets for the homeless? All Trevor could say was, “It’s Jesus inside of me that makes me want to do this.” Trevor Ferrell had Jesus, the Greatest One of All, living inside of him, and this

motivated him to go where Jesus would go, to the neediest members of his community, to share the love of Jesus with them.

And the second rule of greatness is that greatness isn't about you. It's about God working through you. Read through the scriptures from beginning to end and look very carefully at who God used to do His work. God didn't choose the strongest, the most powerful, the bravest, the smartest people to change the world. In fact, almost everyone God chose to use for His work would have been voted "Least Likely to Succeed." So how did they end up being heroes of the faith? They let God use them for God's good works. So, what would happen if you and I did the same thing?

Here is the challenge for this week in a question? Why did God create you?

Was it to collect paychecks and promotions and first place in the pecking order? Or was it to bring hope and life and light to a dark and dying world?

Greatness, as defined by The Greatest One of All, Jesus Christ, consists of two rules: Go where Jesus would go to the least, the last, the lost and the lonely.

And let God use you to serve those in need. Your life will have an eternal, immeasurable impact if you compete to be "the greatest" in the kingdom of God. AMEN.