

Ann Bonner-Stewart

St. Mary's Episcopal Church, Newton Lower Falls, MA

Proper 20B: Mark 9:30-37

22 September 2024

Michael Jordan. Tom Brady. Willie Mays. Simone Biles. All of these athletes have, at one time or another, been called the GOAT, the Greatest of All Time. Each somehow fundamentally shifted assumptions about what was possible in their respective sports. They are all extremely hard workers and, on top of that, they also have that certain *je ne sais quoi* that also allows them to excel.

It is obvious at this point in the story that Jesus too, though certainly not an athlete, has some elements of GOATness about him. He is being compared favorably to other people important in his own cultural and religious context. He draws ridiculously large, incredibly enthusiastic crowds when he goes places. He has admitted to being the Messiah, though he has very clearly signaled that, as the incomparable Mandy Patinkin's (PA-tin-ken) character said in *The Princess Bride*, "You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means." At this point, Jesus is already great, headed towards possible GOATness.

Today, we hear about the disciples and Jesus walking to Capernaum. To be more precise, they are walking BACK to Capernaum. They are headed back to where Andrew, Simon-Peter, James, and John, the first disciples called in Mark 1 leave with Jesus, and where Simon-Peter appears to live. That they are going back to where they started as a group, Capernaum, seems to provide a chance to reflect, to think about the future, as it often does. Jesus, for the second time in Mark, starts telling the disciples again about this untimely, wretched death and what we now refer to as the resurrection. The disciples, as well as us, heard about this betrayal, suffering, rising again for the first time in Mark last week, in chapter 8. This is Jesus saying, "Hey, y'all, this whole great thing is not going to look so great all the time." Ironically, the disciples, seemingly concurrently, are talking about who is the greatest among them; in other versions of this story, they argue about who will sit at Jesus' right and left hand.

It's easy to blame the disciples here, and they do bear some responsibility, as we all do for our own actions. And yet there are quite a few things that prevent them from asking questions. Firstly, Jesus is not being as straightforward he could be. Jesus is also talking in the third person. It'd be like if I said, "She really needs some coffee." "The Son of Man" is a

title we now associate with Jesus, but that connection took a while. “The Son of Man” is from the book of Daniel, and it was not likely that the disciples may or may not have associated that title with the person standing in front of them at the moment. Even if Jesus did say, “I will be betrayed into human hands, and I will be killed, and three days after being killed, I will rise again”-- even that more straightforward version is strange. It is now known The human brain ignores things that it cannot make sense of, often without our knowledge. We know now that is quite literally what our brain does if the information has nowhere to land. What Jesus is saying is confusing, particularly without the benefit of hindsight.

So, why not ask questions. I also want to blame the disciples for not asking any questions, and yet, Jesus is a bit volatile at times. He has gotten quite angry when religious officials ask him questions about, say, ritual hand washing or observing the Sabbath. Last Sunday, Jesus called Peter, one of his closest followers, Satan for possibly spreading misunderstanding. I imagine this is not an experience that Peter nor any of the other disciples wish to repeat. If we are being more honest, Jesus is kind of a wild card in Mark, which is easy to forget since we have the benefit of hindsight.

Jesus doesn't seem to acknowledge the fact that he is being difficult to understand on various levels. He does realize again they are not getting that it's not going to be all rainbows and glitter the whole time, and so he tries to provide an example, an illustration, if you will. Classic pedagogical move. Last Sunday he just talked. This time, Jesus sits, which is the traditional teaching position, and says to be first is to be last and servant of all. A version of this reversal is used several times in the Gospels; it's the “morale of the story” twice in Mark, twice in Matthew, and once in Luke. For today let's focus on the more unique aspect of this passage, on Jesus' illustration of greatness, if you will-- on that of a child. To be great is to be last, Jesus is saying.

Jesus embraces a child, seemingly out of nowhere and says, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.” Childhood in the United States after World War II has been idealized. It's not a compliment now to say that someone had to grow up too fast. Childhood is seen as a unique, innocent time worth protecting, though we as a country seem more bent on banning books rather than doing anything at all that would lessen the need for shelter in place drills. Though the actual experience of childhood is incredibly varied, ridiculously inequitable, with winning the birth lottery being quite a large variable, the idea of childhood being somehow a special time in and of itself still holds.

Though childhood as a concept is not discussed much in the Judeo-Christian texts, there are verses that suggest children are a blessing, particularly a boy. The blessing that children were considered is most clearly shown in the negative, in that, heterosexual couples without

children in antiquity were often considered somehow cursed or passed over, long ago. Scripture suggests children are wanted.

Though religion, culture, and ethnicity were much harder to separate and tease out in Jesus' day, the ideal as described in the Tanakh is not the only force at work. These folks live, work and breathe in a context heavily influenced by Rome. There is shockingly little written about children and childhood in the Roman empire, a signal of their unimportance. They were not really considered individuals but future little adults. Children were often viewed as fairly useless until they could somehow contribute to the household economy, which they did from a very young age, as soon as possible for most families. Children in Roman antiquity were nobodies.

This wider cultural influence, of children being no one, peeks through this Gospel according to Mark. We have not yet heard a child's voice in Mark. We have not even seen a child, unless they are being healed by Jesus at the behest of someone else, usually a parent. And now that we do, the child does not get a name and is called "it" in this translation. And Jesus says, "Whoever welcomes this nobody, this non-person welcomes me." Jesus, who has positioned himself as the GOAT before there was such a thing, . This person without achievement. Without legal status. Without even a name. Without property. Incapable of the things that Jesus is reported to have been doing, things like healings and such. This non-great person is my representative, says Jesus.

Our notions of greatness are more like Jesus' than the . If anything, they've gotten even worse in that they are more difficult to achieve as we know more about more people around the world. The people I referred to in the beginning of the sermon often referred to as the GOAT are very much the first, absolutely not ever the last. They are or were miles ahead of their so-called competitors.

What would it be like if Jesus' definition of greatness as service was embraced? What if greatness was more accessible, for more people, which it is if it is serving, it totally is? What if there was no competitive element to greatness? Would teenagers hang posters of Jane Adamms, widely considered the "mother" of social work, in their rooms? Would children tell their families they want to be garbage collectors or home health aides when they grow up? What outward and visible signs that would signal a much deeper, and honestly a rather radical, change? What would it feel like to live in a world like that? Less stressful? Less scheduled and thus more time and room to breathe? More kind? Greatness is within our reach. How different would it be? How different could it be? Greatness is within our reach. Amen.