

17 Pentecost
September 19, 2021
Mark 9:30-37

The disciples were embarrassed when Jesus asked them what they had been arguing about as they journeyed to Capernaum. Of course, what they were arguing about was which one of them was the greatest. Greatness. What does it mean to be considered great and how do you measure greatness in a person?

Muhammad Ali once boasted, “I am the greatest.” Tom Brokaw authored a popular book a number of years ago entitled, *“The Greatest Generation.”* There are many ways to measure greatness. In the realm of intellect, one might hold up the genius of Albert Einstein for developing his theory of relativity. In the field of art, Michelangelo with his beautiful painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel or his magnificent sculpture of the *Pieta* certainly qualify him to be considered the greatest artist of all time.

Sports fans will argue endlessly whether it is Michael, Kobe, or LeBron who should be considered the greatest basketball player. In our materialistic world, where wealth is often seen as the measure of greatness then Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk or Bill Gates would have to be near the top of the list.

Some might say that it is one’s contribution to humanity that is the measure of greatness. Someone like Dr. Jonas Salk who virtually eradicated the scourge of polio from the world with his vaccine might be considered the greatest.

All those people were extremely talented and considered great in their various fields of endeavors. We might admire and even envy them. But in today’s Gospel we discover another kind of greatness. It is about greatness not as the world views it but the greatness that is formed and revealed in God’s Kingdom.

Jesus knows the end of his ministry is approaching. He wants to make sure his disciples understand who he is and what he is about. So, as they travel down a dusty road he begins to tell them what lies ahead. He tells them that he will be betrayed and put to death and three days later will rise again. As so often happens, the disciples, like us today, just don’t get it. They don’t understand. All they want to talk about is who is the greatest among them.

Jesus, ever patient, calls them over and says, “Sit down boys and pay attention. Listen to what I have to say. Here is the way it works in my Kingdom. If you want to be first, you have to be last. If you want to be great, you have got to be the least.”

And to make his point, Jesus picks up a little child and holding her gently in his arms tells the disciples, “Whoever welcomes a helpless little child like this in my name, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

I have an image of Jesus holding a small crying infant, perhaps with a runny nose and a dirty diaper—about as helpless a creature as one can imagine.

Children in Jesus’ day were not held in high regard. They were powerless and defenseless. They certainly could not take care of themselves. They didn’t produce anything. They didn’t contribute to the economic well-being of the family or enhance the family’s social status in the community. Children had no legal rights. Children were seen as having little or no value. They were truly the last and the least.

Today we live in a society that places great value on the externals—things like money, prestige and social status. Those are the things by which the world often measures greatness. But Jesus says, “That is not the way greatness is measured in my Kingdom.” If we want to be first in God’s Kingdom, we must reach out and touch and minister to and love all the helpless and vulnerable little children that surround us. When we reach out to help and to heal the outsider, the dispossessed and the marginalized, we are not just doing charitable deeds, we are actually reaching out and welcoming Jesus himself.

There are many hurting and vulnerable children in the world. A quick glance at the St. Cyprian’s website reveals just a few of the many children in need. Those you minister to through “Dining with Dignity” the “Ecumenical Food Pantry,” or the “Wildflower Clinic” are but a few of the children all around us. Each of you could no doubt share stories of other children in need you have encountered.

But the truth is, we are all children. We are all children in need. We can believe we are completely secure and self-sufficient. We can convince ourselves that we are in complete control—healthy, wealthy, and certainly wise. But there remains a child-like vulnerability in all of us. We are not only vulnerable to the inevitable problems of life—aging, sickness, and death—events we are all going to face eventually. But we are as vulnerable as a little child when we come to the point and realize that we do not have all the answers—that the things of ultimate importance are not the things we acquire by our own efforts but come only as gifts from God. We do not acquire love, compassion, forgiveness, and mercy in the same way we acquire earthly possessions. They are given to us as a free gift from a most loving God. It is only as we recognize and acknowledge our own child-like vulnerability and our complete and utter dependence on the giver of those gifts that we begin to grow and to become disciples of Jesus. It is ironic that we only begin to mature as Christians as we become more child-like in our faith.

“He who welcomes the little child welcomes me.” We are a community; we are a church of vulnerable children—vulnerable children facing all the problems and pains that are a part of childhood. But we are also children of a most loving God who calls us to welcome and minister to other children. Vulnerable children welcoming vulnerable children. That is what Christians do. That is what the Church does. That is what greatness in the Kingdom of God is about.

In God’s Kingdom, the one who is the greatest is the one who identifies their life with Christ; the one who has such a relationship with Christ that they put aside all worldly understanding of power and greatness to become a humble servant to others. The one who is the greatest is the one who welcomes the child. There are a lot of children out there. Some are as close as down the street and some are as far away as the other side of the world. From the unemployed single Mom trying to find a way to put food on the table to the Eighty-five-year-old “child” lying forgotten in a nursing home. From the tired and sweat stained veteran suffering from PTSD standing on the street corner asking for help to the child separated from their parents at our borders. You don’t have to look far—we all know children. Children of all ages—children suffering from depression, loneliness, alcohol and drug addiction or physical abuse. There are so many vulnerable children in the world that need to be welcomed. There are so many children in the world of all ages that need to hear and to know that they are welcomed, to know they are worthy, to know they are loved. Can you see the child? Who is the child you need to welcome today?

I remember as a child in Sunday School, singing the song, *Jesus loves the little children*. “Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world. Black and yellow, red and white, they’re all precious in His sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world.”

The refrain is the only thing I remember but there are verses to the song as well. One contains these words. "Whether you're rich or whether you're poor, it matters not to Him. He remembers where you're going. Not where you've been."

May we be known; may St. Cyprian's be known as a people who are going somewhere. May we be known as vulnerable children who are going out into the world to welcome other vulnerable children so that all might welcome Christ. That is Kingdom of God greatness.

Amen.