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Mark 9:30-37  
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### **The Measure of Greatness**

There are times when we would rather not know the details of the diagnosis, the facts about the fallout, the trouble with the truth. We know something is wrong inside, but we delay calling the doctor. We know the pink slips were delivered during our lunch break, so we avoid going back to the office. We know that telemarketers would not be calling us at 4:30 in the morning, but we let the machine pick it up anyway. There are times when we don't want to know because we fear we know already.

Jesus was on the move. Time was getting on, after all, and he had meetings to make in Jerusalem. He had business with betrayal, a date with death, and a rendezvous with resurrection. Whoever it was that kept his appointment book apparently knew precious little of what it meant to be messiah. He had tried to explain to his disciples just a week or so before that his was a new niche in the messianic marketplace. He had told them quite plainly that his was a brand new business model, an unheard of innovation in the production of salvation. But it didn't go over very well. Peter thought Jesus was crazy, Jesus thought Peter was Satan, and it was sort of downhill from there. So Jesus reasoned it was worth another try: "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him."

There are times when we don't want to know because we fear we know already. There are times when the truth is too much to take. We cannot face the facts or digest the data. So we stop our ears. We avert our gaze. We distract our minds with fearless fodder that is typical, tasteless, and tame.

"Did you hear about Joe's diagnosis?"

"Yeah, that's a shame. How about those new budget proposals?"

"You know Mary just filed for divorce?"

"I heard that. So what do you think about the President's latest healthcare proposal?"

“Any news on the Smith kid?”

“Yeah, apparently it doesn’t look good. By the way, I’ve got tickets to the game if you’re free on Friday?”

“Did Jesus just say he is going to die?”

“Well, something like that, but I don’t think he meant it like it sounded. Hey, what’s so great about Peter anyway? You think Jesus really likes him or is it more of a pity thing? What do you think? If Jesus could only pick one of us to go to Jerusalem, who would it be? Okay, I’ll make it easy for you. Take Peter, James, and John out of the picture – now, who would he choose?”

That is the game the disciples were playing on the road to Capernaum. That is the game of which they were later ashamed. Jesus spoke of betrayal, but they pondered prestige. Jesus spoke of sacrifice, but they thought about gain. Jesus spoke of God’s power, but they mused on their own. They knew from the get-go that it was all wrong. Caught rummaging in the cookie jar of their own frightened egos, they were stupefied, saddened, and ridden with shame. They said nothing to Jesus, for there was nothing to say – nothing that could take it back or patch it up or put it right. They had lagged behind on the road to paint portraits of grandeur, while Jesus marched forward to paint a cross with his blood. The irony struck like a knife in the heart and the silence was like sudden death. They waited – mute, palms sweating, hearts racing – for a word from the one they had wounded. Peter stood up for Jesus, and he was called Satan, what would Jesus call those who stood up for themselves?

As it turned out, he called them disciples, those who have something to learn. He did not throw a fit and call names. He did not hang his head and weep. He simply sat down, in good rabbinic style, and shared what he knew of God’s kingdom: “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Whoever wants to be great must be small. Whoever wants to be strong must be weak. Whoever wants to be best must be worst. Whoever wants to rule must serve. We might expect Jesus to respond by abolishing rank altogether. *Listen up now! There is no such thing as first and last, most and least, in God’s kingdom. Everyone is equal in God’s sight.* But no, Jesus says there is a system of rank in the kingdom and it is inversely related to our own. He does not repudiate human ambition; he upends it. He does not renounce greatness; he redefines it.

He does not reject the quest for success; but he redirects it downward. There is nothing wrong with striving for greatness, Jesus says, provided we know wherein true greatness lies.

To make his point, he took a little child into his arms. And we think, “Now, isn’t that precious. Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world.” And of course Jesus does. But that is not what his disciples would have been thinking. They would have been thinking, “Now, isn’t that supremely odd. This guy has really lost his marbles.” We think of children as bundles of innocence, purity, sweetness, and joy. They are God’s little gifts and our little treasures. They are pint-sized people, but people just the same, sharing the same rights and privileges we accord to ourselves. They deserve our protection, our nurture, our guidance, our care.

But in first-century Palestine, children were chattel. They had no rights to speak of, no virtue in themselves. They existed on the lowest rung of the social ladder with the last of the last and the least of the least. Children were valued, when they were valued at all, as potential adults. It was good to have them around, you see, because someday they would be able, someday they would be strong, someday they would work, contribute, produce. Keep them rested and fed, give them food and a bed, because someday they would be worth something....someday.

But there Jesus sat with a child in his arms, and he bid his disciples take note: “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.” He was not being sweet. He was not being cute. He was not a misty-eyed sentimentalist waxing nostalgic about the lost innocence of childhood. He was a fiery-eyed preacher waxing prophetic about the nature of genuine greatness. His embrace of a child, the least and the last, was a living parable of the kingdom, an embodied declaration that God’s values are our values in reverse.

Children were helpless, dependent, low of rank and short on power. They could not get you a job. They could not lend you money. They could not run for office. They could not manufacture. They could not construct. They could not invest. In practical, measurable, material terms they had nothing whatsoever to offer. They lived wholly on the receiving end of life, accepting whatever was given them – be it a lot or a little, a boon or a bane – for lack of any other alternative.

And that is how we should be, right? Always in the receiving mode? Helpless, dependent, low of rank and short on power? Didn't Jesus say that if we wanted to be first in the kingdom we had to become like little children? Well, yes. He did say that in Matthew's gospel. But let's not confuse that with his message in Mark. Here Jesus says that if we want to be first in the kingdom we must not become like little children but we must welcome them instead. We must reach out and reach into the lives of the downtrodden and the dispossessed. We must care for those from whom we having nothing whatsoever to gain; for in so doing we are caring for God. Did you catch that? When we welcome and care, reach out and reach in, it is none other than God whom we serve. It is not the disciples, not you and me, but the least ones, the last ones, the cast down and cast out who are the agents of God in this story. The way we treat them is the way we treat God and the way we treat God determines our greatness.

Margaret Mead, the eminent anthropologist who spent her life studying ancient humanity, was once asked what qualified as the earliest sign of civilization. The person asking the question expected her to answer by saying that civilization began when the first tools were made or when crops were planted for the first time. But instead, Mead said that the earliest sign of civilization are some remains that show a broken leg was allowed to heal. She pointed out that in prehistoric times, if you had a broken leg, you could not hunt, you could not work, you could do almost nothing to help yourself. In other words, if you had a broken leg, you were nothing but a liability. But those remains indicate that instead of allowing the person with the broken leg to die, the other people must have cared for that injured person and brought him food. And that act of compassion, that act of service, Mead said, is the first sign of civilization. Jesus might have called it the first sign of greatness – to care for those whom most would deem worthless, to reach out in welcome to a living liability.

It is easy to care, easy to serve, easy to love when there is something in it for us. We do it every day at home, at work, at church. We give of our proverbial time, talent, and treasure to a host of people, places, and things. But more often than not we get something back in return – be it money or favor, appreciation or affection. But Jesus had something else in mind. By making a child his example, he made clear that the service of which he spoke was service for its own sake, service directed toward those who have

nothing whatsoever to offer us in return.

The story is told of a newspaper reporter who was writing a story on Mother Theresa's work among the poorest of the poor in Calcutta. One morning, as he was being shown around a makeshift hospital where lepers were being treated, he found the little nun herself seated at the bedside of a suffering patient. She had removed a bandage from the poor man's leg and was hard at work, cleaning an awful-looking, foul-smelling wound. With a disgusted look on his face, the reporter said, "I wouldn't do that for a million dollars." Theresa looked up at him and replied, "Neither would I." To serve expecting nothing in return - that, according to Jesus, is the measure of true greatness.

"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Whoever wants to be first...Well, now, that would seem to be all of us, would it not? We all want to be first. We all want to be great. It's who we are. It's in our nature. And the good news is that opportunities abound, if only we know where to look. A young rabbinical student asked the rabbi, "Rabbi, why don't people see God today as they did in the past?" The wise old man put his hands on the student's shoulders and said, "The answer, my son, is because no one is willing to stoop so low."

"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." That, my brothers and sisters, is discipleship in a nutshell. If we have to ask what Jesus really meant by that and what it requires of us, what it looks like in our lives, well, then perhaps it bears reminding that there are times when we don't want to know because we fear we know already. AMEN.