

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

September 22, 2024

THE GOOD NEWS:
GOATS and Kids
Laura Bentley

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: September 22, 2024

This morning, we continue in the Gospel of Mark. We find Jesus and his disciples back on home turf in Galilee. They have crisscrossed throughout the northern parts of Israel-Palestine, and now Jesus brings them back where they began to quietly instruct them about what is to come. Jesus sees the writing on the wall; he knows what will happen when he brings his message of God's Kingdom to the seat of power in Judea. He knows that the path he is called to walk will end with resurrection life, but first, there will be rejection, betrayal, and death.

His disciples have heard this prediction once already. But they still do not understand, and their focus strays elsewhere.

Prayer for Illumination

Great and good God,
We listen to the words of Scripture to hear your word to us.
Speak to our insecurities and fears,
speak to our hopes and strivings,
speak and still our souls,
that we might find our purpose and peace in you.
Amen.

Let us listen for God's living word through the roar of Mark's Gospel this morning.

Mark 9:30-37

³⁰ They went on from there and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know it, ³¹ for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “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.” ³² But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

³³ Then they came to Capernaum, and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” ³⁴ But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. ³⁵ He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” ³⁶ Then he took a little child and put the child among them, and taking the child in his arms he said to them, ³⁷ “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

The Kids' Table

I am the younger of two children in my family. On my dad's side, I am one of twelve grandchildren—the fourth youngest of those twelve. During holidays, we would converge on my grandparents' house and divide into two groups of children: The big kids and the little kids. I was, of course, one of the little

kids. And the little kids sat at the kitchen table during dinner. It was the ultimate kids' table. The adults were over here, the big kids over there, and we were on our own little island.

The kids' table is so much better than the grown-up table when you are a kid. But perhaps you've experienced the feeling—if not the reality—of remaining at the kids' table past your graduation date. I have heard stories of friends, who were not yet married or did not yet have children in their 30's, feeling like every family gathering was a sentence to the metaphorical kids' table. It is often not pleasant to be set apart, off to the side.

Context Clues

Jesus' disciples knew the feeling of insignificance. They were the cast aside within the Roman Empire. They were tax collectors, rejected within their own communities. They were fishermen, laborers, working to sustain their families day by day, coming in from the lake smelling of sweat and fish. They were zealots, ready to fight back against the forces that exploited them and stole their autonomy. They were not political leaders, religious authorities, men with much prestige. They did not expect their names to one day be on buildings, or monuments to one day be erected in their honor. They were close to the margins.

But then they were called to walk with this itinerate preacher named Jesus. And a movement was building. Crowds gathered. He healed. He taught. He had power over demons and the seas. He spoke of God's Kingdom drawing near, preparing them and the crowds for a new era of God's reign and rule. They had travelled all over the northern parts of Israel-Palestine. They had even been sent by Jesus to do the same things as he—they healed, drove out demons, preached the Good News of God's Kingdom. Peter had voiced what, perhaps, the others hoped, too—This is God's Messiah, the anointed one, the one we've been waiting for. They were on the cusp of something significant. And they were not on the margins—they were in the center with Jesus.

As close as they stuck with Jesus, though, they just did not understand what he was doing and how he was doing it. The "Kingdom of God drawing near" sounded good to those for whom the kingdoms of this world could not care less. That they would have authority to cast out demons and to bring healing to their people—that sounded like power. That thousands could be fed by five loaves and two fish— that sounded like abundance. That Jesus could forgive sin— that sounded like freedom. But Jesus was becoming insistent: He would die and in three days rise again. This did not add up for the disciples.

The Messiah was to establish a new era of peace, righteousness, and justice for God's people. How could he possibly do that if he died? What did he mean that he would rise again? Was he speaking in parables, a metaphor? It was unsettling. Here they were, back where they began, and Jesus was taking things in an uncomfortable, confusing direction. It frightened them. It left them feeling insecure. They were finally at the center of something big, but what if Jesus was right? What if he was killed? What would happen to them and to this coming kingdom?

These questions remained below the surface as the disciples followed Jesus to Capernaum. And their anxiety turned to bluster as they started debating: Who is the greatest?

The Roman GOAT

Greatness shaped the world of the disciples. Emperor Augustus had deemed the era, "Pax Romana." The Peace of Rome. Augustus viewed himself as the savior of not only the Roman Empire, but of the known world. He was divinely appointed and divinely imbued to bring peace and prosperity to the earth. Of course, his peace came through the sword. His peace came through allegiance. His peace came through keeping the forces of unrest subdued.

People like disciples were the collateral damage of Rome's peaceful kingdom. The worst collateral damage of the Rome's

peaceable kingdom were those hung up on crosses. Those who threatened the social order, which allowed Rome's elite to prosper, were made an example. Peace at the center was possible because of violence, coercion, and fear on the margins.

Obviously, we look back on this and are aghast at the barbarism contained within it. But Rome was seeking greatness. Augustus understood himself to be the greatest emperor of all time. The GOAT, Roman Empire style.

We debate about greatness quite a bit still today. What makes for the greatest athlete, politician, country, performer, artist? We are still impressed by greatness. We still strive for greatness. I don't begrudge anyone the title of GOAT. But it is so easy to argue about because greatness is so ill-defined. What makes anyone great? The most points, the most followers, the most liked, the most money, the most creative, the most ruthless? It all depends. Even with its slippery definition, greatness shapes our world.

I was, however, defined a little more clearly in the first century Roman world. There were those who served and those who were served. The fewer people you served, the fewer you answered to, the greater you were. Greatness went hand and hand with wealth and prestige. And it gave the great person a sense of control and security. A "sense of control and security"

because greatness is never a static position. There's always the threat of someone else becoming greater than the greatest.

To be great, you had to make sure those who served knew their place. You had to make sure that there was a distinction between the servant and the served. Earlier in Mark, we see this strikingly and sickeningly when King Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great, promised his daughter at a banquet that he would give her anything she asked. She demanded the head of John the Baptist, and Herod commanded his servants to make it happen.

Now, the disciples saw clearly through the insecure, inhumane, unjust greatness of rulers like Herod. They were ready for men like Herod, and even Augustus, to be at the bottom rather than the top. But as the disciples debated greatness, it seemed they left the structure of greatness unquestioned. The structure where "making it" meant you were in command; you were honored and served; you could bring justice (and maybe a little vengeance); you were above others.

Their hope was for the pyramid to remain, but for God to finally put the right people at the top. When God succeed in doing this, who would end up at the top? Jesus, of course. Moses? Elijah? Peter? Andrew? John? Jesus may have been

talking about death and resurrection, but surely God would give victory to the Messiah and turn the empire upside down, with God's chosen at the top.

Greatness According to the Real GOAT

I imagine Jesus walking along the road hearing the whispers that would get louder with passion then quiet back down. I imagine Jesus knew what they had been talking about because like a parent driving kids in a car, we know what they are saying in the back seat.

They arrive in Capernaum, and Jesus asks them, "What were you arguing about on the way here?" And they are silent.

Jesus sits down, taking the posture of a teacher, and he tears down the pyramid of greatness in one sentence, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." He does not simply flip the pyramid upside, placing the servants at the top to be served when the kingdom comes. No, he says the act of service itself is the way of greatness. Greatness is not a destination to strive for, to push others out of the way for, to topple the ones at the top to get to— it is the path, the way itself, of serving others.

Jesus then brings a little kid into the center of the disciples gathered around him. There was no one more vulnerable and with less status than a child. Children, still, experience being at

the whim of the power and decisions of the adults around them. “Who is the greatest?” Jesus answers by welcoming a child among them. Greatness in the Kingdom of God looks like embracing and centering those who are on the bottom of the worldly pyramid. Those who do not have power, authority, and security.

Choosing a Seat at the Kid’s Table

This path of greatness is the one Jesus walked from the moment of incarnation. And in every healing, in every teaching, in every confrontation with religious and political authorities, Jesus walked the way he called his disciples to follow. In his insistence that this ends in death and resurrection, not a conqueror’s victory, he was leading them the way of greatness. He confounded those who continued to believe in a pyramid, as he chose to place himself at the kid’s table, among the most vulnerable, the marginalized, those who were not viewed as worthy to be served.

The disciples hoped for a new kingdom, a new way, a new definition of greatness that would include them. And the good news for them and for us is that Jesus has redefined greatness. The good news is that Jesus does not care all that much about our greatness by the standards of the world. No matter our access to money, fame, health, talent; Jesus calls us to lives of significance rooted in welcoming and serving the most

vulnerable among us. The Kingdom is built bottom up, inside out, centering the least and the othered.

Church, we are not called to imagine ourselves at the banquets of kings or sitting next to GOATs, but to envision ourselves beside the family in grief, the refugee fleeing, the person living along the bike trail, the mother who has lost her child to gun violence, the places where the world's greatness does not matter very much, but the compassionate way of Jesus does.

How can you center who is at the margins? How can you welcome those who have been pushed aside to the proverbial kids' table? How do you wield the power that you do have?

Jesus calls us to his kind of greatness in our homes, work, schools, and neighborhoods; at PTA meetings, in board rooms, within our school districts, through our civic engagement...in how we live our lives.

May we follow the path of greatness that Jesus walked. Amen.



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