

The Little Ones (Mark 9:30-37)

What does it mean to be great? If you watch horse racing ... I mean, politics, you're familiar with this question. What does it mean to be great?

Who has the power?

Who sits at the top of the heap?

Much of the furor in the Presidential campaign over the last month or so has been about, of all things, crowd size. One of the candidates has tended to look to the number of people attending rallies as a measure of his popularity. But this shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone who's been even partially conscious during the recent past. For this candidate, size is apparently the only way to measure value.

How fat is your bank account? Do you have enough power to do whatever you want ... to whomever you want? How famous are you? Do you have the tallest buildings, the best golf score, the greatest number of gold bathroom fixtures?

In other words, are you big enough that I need to pay attention to you?

Of course, if ***bigness*** is the way you calculate worth, that means most people are rendered disposable because they don't have enough influence with the right folks, aren't known by enough people, or don't possess the requisite number of golden toilets.

If big is the standard, a lot of people get left out.

But the reality that some people get written off has been around for a long time—even in the land of the free and the home of the brave.

We've got a statue that says different: *"Give me your tired, your poor/Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,/The wretched refuse of your teeming shore./Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,/I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"*

But there are a lot of "tempest-tost" who have historically resided at the bottom of our national to-do list. Women, African-Americans, immigrants, LGBTQ, the elderly, children, the poor, the illiterate, the houseless, the folks who carry lunch pails to work, or those still unable to find work.

A lot of people get lost in the shuffle because, whether we admit it or not, the world tends to discount their contributions.

Our culture is built on the idea of bigness. It's too easy to look past the little ones. We want excellence. We love winners.

Oh, there may be those who despise greatness, but usually only from a sense of envy. Right? In our more idealistic moments, even when we wouldn't admit it to anyone else, we all aspire to greatness of **some** sort.

And though the standards for greatness aren't written down anywhere, like Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart, we know it when we see it. It has always been thus and will continue to be.

Excellence. Success. Winners. Every culture in history has valued it.

No civilization, no tribe, no dynasty has ever said, "Come on, mediocrity is within our grasp!"

As the old monster.com job site said in one of its commercials, nobody dreams of "clawing their way up to middle management."

Greatness has always been the prize. Losing is for ... well ... losers.

In light of the standards of greatness, I think it was a rather unpleasant moment for the disciples when Jesus said, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him ..."

As a matter of fact, so far out of the realm of possibility was Jesus announcement of his impending death that Mark says they didn't even understand what he was trying to say.

They were getting ready to put Jesus on top of their list of **winners**. They figured that Jesus was going to be the next rags-to-riches story. They were pretty sure that soon he would overthrow the Roman rulers in Judea, reestablish the throne of David, and they could ride along on his glorious coattails.

They'd already begun dividing up the choice positions in the new administration. "I've got dibs on vice president."

"No way! I called it first."

"Well, then I want Secretary of State."

"That's fine. Just leave me *Chief of Staff*."

Jesus wheels around and says, "Hey, what are you guys talking about?"

Silence. But he knew.

Somehow, he knew that this inveterate bunch of point-missers had done it again. He'd just told them for the third time, according to Mark, that he was going to die.

At first he'd done it in veiled language, so as not to shock them. They didn't understand. Now, he tells them point blank, "I'm going to be assassinated," and it just whistles through their ears,

not any more comprehensible than if he'd said, "The Cubs are going to win the World Series next year."

Even after all this time, the disciples still absolutely have the wrong impression of what it means to be great according to God's standards—the standards of God's unfolding reign.

"Look," Jesus says, "whoever wants to be first must be the last of all and servant of all."

Crickets. Blank stares. Nothing. In effect, what Jesus is saying is, "If you think that you're going to ride into the new kingdom by the force of your character, you're wrong. Dead wrong. If you think that fancy titles and broad powerbases are going to get you in good with God, you've got another think coming.

"If you **think** that God is impressed by your heroics or moral purity, your sterling stock portfolio, or your amazing networking, I've got news for you ... God's not.

"The way to make it big in this kingdom is to realize that you're dead ducks without me. That's it. Because until you figure out that you can't waltz your way into God's favor, until you figure out that God doesn't **need** you on the team, until you realize that apart from my death you don't stand a chance—well, then, you don't stand a chance."

That seems kind of harsh. They're just arguing a little about who's the smartest, who's the bravest, who could win at arm wrestling. The testosterone level is running a little high, but any time you get thirteen guys together, there's going to be a little chest thumping, some jockeying for position. For better and for worse, it's typical.

They're arguing about who's the greatest. No big deal.

They're just setting up the pecking order so that when the reign of God finally emerges, they'll be prepared to have the new administration ready to hit the ground running.

They're calling dibs on the new jobs, and Jesus says, "Wait a minute. You're barking up the wrong messianic tree. The reign of God looks almost exactly opposite of the one you've pictured in your mind."

And then Jesus does something that seems puzzling: he embraces a child.

The traditional way of looking at this is, "Oh, what a wonderful gesture. Jesus has time for innocent little children. Jesus wants us to become like children because they're so trusting and without guile. They're the perfect model of faith and innocence."

That's not how the disciples would have seen it. Prior to the nineteenth century, children weren't seen in such a wholesome

way. They would have understood children differently than we do, considering the moral character of children more along the lines of Jean De La Bruyere, who said in 1688:

Children are overwhelming, supercilious, passionate, envious, inquisitive, egotistical, idle, fickle, timid, intemperate, liars and dissemblers; they laugh and weep easily, are excessive in their joys and sorrows, and that about the most trifling subjects; they bear no pain, but like to inflict it on others; already they are men.

So, for a moment, let's put aside any modern, optimistic Victorian views of childhood. Because, as Robert Capon says,

Victorian sentimentality is precisely what all those intellectually loosey-goosey pictures of Jesus blessing a mixed bag of tiny tykes are actually about. The modern world's wishful view of childhood as a blessed, innocent state—and thus of children as fundamentally unfallen creatures—is a late nineteenth century invention. Prior to that time, children were not only seen as no less sinful than anyone else; they were also seen as imperfect, sawed-off adults who needed little more than to have their imperfections beaten out of them and their education beaten into them. Children were seen as losers, in other words—and childhood was considered a state that no sane child (or adult) would choose to stay in for one minute more than necessary.

Indeed, Paul Achtemeier points out, "[Children, in Jesus' society were] powerless and helpless. A child in that world was entirely at the mercy of the head of the family."

All right then, what **is** Jesus trying to accomplish with this apparently metaphorical act—picking up a child?

Simply this: in order to be caught up in the wonderful life of the resurrection, we must first acknowledge God's embrace of the powerless, the forgotten, the insignificant, as well as our own inability to be worthy on our own.

In other words, our salvation, our reconciliation, our return to the home from which God calls us rely on one thing—our realization that apart from the life Jesus announces for all God's creatures, we're all "dead meat." And if that's true, God has given us a new purpose in seeking out the last, the least, the lost, and the little ones.

Why?

Because where they are ... God is.

Therefore, as Jesus embraced the child as a symbol of powerlessness and death, we're called to embrace our own lack of power, relying on the love and grace of the most merciful parent of all.

Moreover, embracing powerlessness in ourselves opens us up to the welcome we must now extend to the little ones, those who've been left behind by the rest of the world.

Only in that realization can we become great. Because, after we realize that—sterling stock portfolios and winning personalities aside—any greatness that emerges isn't something we ginned up on our own; it's God's.

Being popular, athletic, smart, or "really, really nice" just doesn't cut it. Our greatness, in God's eyes, lies in our willingness to admit our littleness and impotence and our resolve to wander around seeking to find others who've been left out in the cold by the powerful and the "in-control."

"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and a servant of all."

In Mexico they dream of greatness, just like everywhere else. One of the most impressive ways to climb ladder of excellence south of the border is becoming a hero on the soccer field. True glory in Latin America lies in fútbol.

My uncle Juan was headed down that road. He had a promising future on the soccer pitch. He played for the university and was ready to grab the brass ring—play professionally—when he was forced to make a choice about what true greatness means.

My grandparents were in their late seventies, getting ready to retire from running the children's home in the mountains of central Mexico. The problem was ... they couldn't find anyone to come in and take over. They'd put off retirement as long as they could, but they were getting tired. Raising kids is tough work.

Juan had a late night conversation ... just he and God. Before him lay a choice: his own dreams of greatness, now within his reach, or raising somebody else's kids with almost recognition, and even less money.

He chose the children—the ones whose parents, for whatever reason, could no longer care for them. He gave up his own ideas about greatness and bought into God's. He walked away from his own dreams of success on the soccer field.

It turns out there are dozens of kids all over Mexico who are extraordinarily grateful he did.

Tough stuff, Jesus. It's a radical restructuring of reality. It turns all our cherished ideas about success on their heads.

Because if you want eyes to see true greatness, eyes to see from God's perspective, eyes to see the reign of God ... if you want a different view of what it means to be a child of God regardless of crowd size, welcoming the little ones is the place to start.

-Amen.