

What Trails after Greatness  
Mark 9:33-35  
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In our Gospel text today, it comes as no surprise that Jesus' disciples would be arguing over who might be the greatest among themselves. Not too long ago, they had been deployed for field-work. Jesus' disciples were finally able to get a taste of the ministry. They were filled with anticipation and excitement to go forth and share everything that they had been taught by Jesus. The desire of any Jewish disciple was to faithfully emulate their rabbi. So with confidence, they casted out evil spirits, healed the sick, fed the hungry, and spread the gospel among the lost children of God. They did amazing things!

But at one point when a large crowd had gathered around them arguing against the teachers of the law, Jesus asked those around him what was going on. Then a man from the crowd told him that his son was possessed by an evil spirit, and that the disciples could not drive it out in spite of their earlier successes with others. Jesus responded with frustration but ultimately drove this evil spirit out from the man's son, afterward, the disciples struggled to understand why they had so much trouble with this one event. Yet, even after their failure to help that man's son, they the disciples of Jesus went about arguing who among them was the greatest, when all along the greatest was the one standing before them: Jesus.

You see, the disciples were so caught up in their own victories. What trailed behind their own self-perceived greatness was their pride. They had completely lost sight of who really overcame the powers of darkness and who had actually come out victorious. When really what Jesus demanded from them was faith in him alone. Through the faith of his disciples he worked to bring the kingdom of God to others. He alone overcomes the power of darkness. He comes out victorious.

This past year has been one incredible adventure for myself and my family. And I'm sure many of my classmates will say the same. But it won't come as a surprise to me when my classmates and I return to St. Louis, there will be conversations amongst us concerning who might be the greatest due to our vicarage experiences. Very much like Jesus' disciples, we were trained and prepared for the ministry. We'll have accomplished amazing things. We'll have stories and compare those to one another. We'll be praising each other for how much we've done during that year, and give thanks to God for such an opportunity. Confidence and pride will be glowing from our faces. Some more brightly than others.

But like the disciples, we all want to be idolized, all of us here want to be idolized whether it's for our intellect, our bodies, our talents, or for our successes. Even when it comes to accomplishing good, we feel we deserve nothing less than recognition for our efforts. We are looking for our crowns. Some do receive such things in humility, but many of us feel deep inside that we are deserving, thinking "I am the greatest, why wouldn't this be mine?" Satan points us to the very top where

any one person who can reach it will be exalted and glorified before all others. He promises greatness in a very worldly sense: People will be chanting your name, riches and fame will be yours, monuments will be raised up in your honor, men and women will flock to your feet. He promises everything your heart desires.

And if we know anything, “the heart wants what it wants” whether it’s someone’s body, relationship, place of authority, honor, material goods, or even their death. Satan knows how to bait these things before you as a lovely crown that subtly says, “with this, you are in complete control.” It’s so alluring that we give chase to it, pushing aside others in the way. But can you imagine what lies behind as we continue to push forward? A trail of broken relationships, weariness, heavy and hardened hearts, paranoia, and blood. There’s no doubt a number of messy struggles had taken place when we looking back. But in our efforts to be the greatest of idols, you and I struggled against and put to death only one person: Jesus.

He was lifted up on the cross for everyone to see. Everyone gathered to see him. We chanted his name alongside death. Yet, in the midst of all the noise he said something surprising. He said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

For Jesus’ sake, God has forgiven us of all our messed up sins. It was on that cross the lowly servant of all made his plea to his Father in heaven on our behalf with his life. Jesus is the greatest of all because he laid down his life for you and for me while we were still sinners chasing after our own idols and self-made greatness. Jesus alone overcame the power and temptation of Satan. Jesus alone conquered death. And Jesus, now, is at the right hand of the Father and all things have been given unto him and are underneath his reign and rule.

In spite of our sins against him, he comes to you and offers rest. He alone offers to carry your burden in exchange for his, which is much lighter. He offers you a crown more majestic and beautiful than any other than can be found. No matter how far you have walked down the deep and dark road, he offers to come and find you, and after embracing you, he walks beside you towards home. The greatness of Jesus is not measured in what he has done for himself, but what he has done for you and for me on the cross.

Jesus continues to live out his greatness through us by the Spirit for all to see. Having the Spirit of Christ, He calls us to live our lives as servants for all people. The Apostle Paul was a great example of this as we saw in our epistle today. For the sake of the gospel, Paul became all things, dwelling closely among Jews and Gentiles in order that some might be saved. His endeavor was to reflect the greatness of Jesus Christ through his life so that they too might embrace the way of the cross.

Like Paul, we are all called to do amazing things as disciples. Jesus has called you not because of any greatness you may possess, but because he loves you and cares for you. You were chosen before the creation of the world in order that you

might bear witness of Jesus throughout your life. And for many of us, how we go about our lives in the Spirit will look different. As pastors and vicars, he calls us to be faithful in the teaching and preaching of God's Word. As mothers and fathers and teachers, that our love for our children would reflect God's love for us. As husbands and wives, that our love for one another emulates Jesus' love for his bride the Church. As single folks, that you remain faithful and pure in service to God as Jesus was likewise. As children, that we love and obey our parents as Jesus was obedient to the Father. As breadwinners, that we trust in God for the wellbeing of our families just as Jesus had trusted in God to sustain him. The list can go on and on and on. God wants you to shine brightly so that when people see you, they don't see you, but they see someone greater working through you: Jesus. What trails behind him the greatest of all is love, mercy, forgiveness, and life.

Now may the peace of God which surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.