



WESTLAKE HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

"The Measure of Greatness"
Sermon Series: "The Way of Jesus #30
Mark 9:33-37
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Mark 9:33-37 (New International Version)

³³They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?" ³⁴But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. ³⁵Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all." ³⁶He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me."

Introduction.

I have in my hand a ruler. This ruler is one that has two sets of markings on it. One set divides the ruler into inches. The other divides it into millimeters. There are two standards of measure on this ruler.

When it comes to measuring greatness, there are also two standards of measure: God's and the world's. The world measures greatness by money, power, influence, the size of your home, the car you drive, the clothes you wear, the people you know, or the size of your investment portfolio. But God measures greatness in a very different way, and the passage that we have before us this morning talks about this very thing.

The text tells us after Jesus and His disciples had come to Capernaum, He asked them, "*What were you arguing about along the road?*" When Jesus asked that question, it probably got pretty quiet in the room. No one wanted to speak up and admit to anything. The disciples were probably looking down at their sandals, trying to make sure they were laced up and hoping Jesus wasn't going to call on them. Instinctively they were embarrassed about the discussion they had just had, because they had been arguing about who was the greatest.

Perhaps Peter, James and John, who had just been on the Mount of Transfiguration with the Lord, were feeling important and had an inflated sense of their place. Maybe they thought when Jesus became king, they would become His prime ministers. Or perhaps the other 9 disciples were defensive about their inability to cast out the evil spirit in the little boy which had just taken place earlier in chapter 9.

As we look at the measure of greatness, I want us to examine what this passage says about our desire for greatness, Jesus' example of greatness, and how on this Mother's Day moms can be great in the Kingdom of God.

I. Our Desire for Greatness.

We all yearn to be great. We want to be picked first; we want to be number 1 in the polls. We want to be the CEO, the head of the department, have a 4.0 GPA, graduate *summa cum laude*. (However, I have a friend who said he graduated *laude how cum!* He was just glad to get out of school and graduate!) We usually think greatness has to do with position and power and rank, and we strive to make our mark on the world. We try to climb our various ladders of success, and we work hard to make sure greatness comes our way.

Christians are not exempt from this. I have a friend who once told me jokingly that, as a college football player, his goal was to get his picture on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* magazine. But after he became a Christian his goal was getting his picture on the cover of *Christianity Today* magazine! Pastors yearn for greatness just like everyone else. We compare the size of our church's membership and our buildings and budgets. We want to be thought of as a great preacher. We all yearn for greatness.

However, greatness doesn't always come our way, does it? Rarely do all of our dreams come true, and even when they do sometimes our dreams turn into nightmares. It's hard to climb to the top of the hill, and it's even harder to stay there. Psychologists tell us that mid-life is that season when we have to adjust our life's goals and



alter our standards and aims. It's a time when we have to decide either modify, lower or even correct the aim of our lives. Maybe you're in a period of re-evaluation yourself.

The worst thing in all of this is that whenever we seek to measure greatness, more often than not we use the wrong standard. We look at what the world says is great rather than how God evaluates these things, and you and I need a healthy corrective in our thinking.

Jesus talked about this in Mark 9. The text tells us the Lord sat down and had the twelve disciples gather around Him. When a rabbi taught, when he wanted to make sure his students paid careful attention, he sat to teach. Jesus deliberately took the position of the rabbi to teach His disciples about greatness, and He told them if they sought for real greatness in this world, they would find it not by being first, but by being last. Not by being masters, but by being servants of all. It was not that Jesus abolished ambition altogether. Rather, He re-created and redirected it. For the ambition to rule, He substituted the ambition to serve. For the ambition to have things done for us, He substituted the ambition to do things for others.

People who learn this truth discover a new way of life which is both liberating and more fulfilling than they could imagine before. Henri Nouwen was a well-known Catholic priest and professor who made a remarkable move in the latter part of his life. He went from being a professor at Harvard University to serving a community for handicapped adults in Toronto called Daybreak. He went from teaching the best and the brightest in the world to serving a small group of physically and mentally challenged people in Canada.

Nouwen gave a talk about it at Harvard about a year after he had been with Daybreak. At Daybreak he wasn't called "professor." Rather, he was called an "assistant." He didn't teach many classes or sit on important academic committees. Instead his only assignment, like that of the 3 others serving with him, was to care for 6 handicapped people in his family unit. An epileptic young man named Adam was his special assignment. The priest bathed, shaved, dressed and cared for Adam's needs all day long. In Adam, Nouwen said he saw God's unqualified love for a person who can neither produce nor perform.

Henri Nouwen said that all his life two voices competed inside him. One encouraged him to succeed and achieve, while the other called him simply to rest in the comfort that he was "the beloved of God." Only in the last decade of his life did he truly listen to that second voice. Ultimately Nouwen concluded that "the goal of education and formation for the ministry is continually to recognize the Lord's voice, face, and His touch in every person we meet."¹

Philip Yancey has written that for him a single image captures Henri Nouwen best: the energetic priest, hair in disarray, using his restless hands as if to fashion a homily out of thin air, celebrating an eloquent birthday Eucharist just for Adam when the young man turned 26. It was a service just for him, an unresponsive child-man so damaged that most parents would have had him aborted. I cannot imagine a better symbol of the incarnation.

When I heard of Nouwen's experience, I was reminded of Jesus' teaching on greatness. The capacity to serve is the capacity for greatness, and my greatness is not predicated on how much work I can do, how much money I make, how many friends I have on Facebook, or how many accolades I rake in. Greatness is measured by how deeply I love Jesus and the other people around me and how deeply I can serve.

II. Jesus Example of Greatness.

Our Lord went on to demonstrate by example what He meant in His teaching. He took a little child in His arms and said, *"Whoever welcomes one of these little children in My name welcomes Me...."* Jesus urged His disciples to value and prize children, which was a revolutionary thought in His day.

In the first century AD, a child was a nobody. They had no power, they had no standing, they had no voice or vote. And yet, in a very tender demonstration, Jesus showed His disciples that reaching out and holding a person, serving someone with no power, no standing, a nobody – that is what greatness is all about.

We don't know anything about the child Jesus took in His arms. Was he tall or short? Was he young or old? Was he well-behaved or mischievous? Was he well or sick? The text doesn't tell us. Which I think is also the beauty of it. The child is any child. He is every child. He is the child in our midst.



There are nearly two billion children in the world today – 1/3 of the world’s population. Thirty thousand of them die every day because of malnutrition and disease. Our world places a very low value on children for the most part. No matter what the ill of society, it tends to spiral downward and have the most devastating impact on our littlest citizens. When hunger and famine strike a nation, adults become weak and hungry, but it’s the children who most often starve to death. When disease or war or natural disasters hit, the children are the ones who suffer the most.

Children have no political clout. They don’t have a voice, and they can be pushed around and to the margins of society. It is all the more reason you and I need to become their champions and make a difference in the lives of kids. It’s how we can become great in the Kingdom of God.

This morning we baptized four children at one of our worship services. They are the newest members of our church family. As a part of our celebration of this holy sacrament, the parents took a vow that, trusting in the grace of God and the power of His Holy Spirit, they would do everything they could to bring their children up in the love and admonition of the Lord. You and I took a vow, too. We take it every time a child is baptized in our church. We promised we would undertake with these parents the Christian nurture of these children. It doesn’t just take a village to raise a child. It takes a church!

My question to you this morning is what are you actively doing to fulfill that vow? How are you a champion for children in this church, and how does God want you to be great in the kingdom by serving kids? Ministry to children is one of the most strategic areas of our church’s ministry. Studies indicate that nearly 85 percent of people who give their lives to Christ do so before the age of 15. With children, the clay is soft, and they can still be shaped for God. Their numbers are large – 1/3 of the world’s population, and they are our future. And besides that, they’ll be the ones taking care of us when we’re all old!

Followers of Jesus should be champions for children. We should speak up and act on behalf of the littlest ones of our society, and we should give of our time and our money to make sure we are reaching the next generation for Christ. As we move into our new Sunday morning schedule later this month, we’ll need more Sunday School teachers than ever before. Contact Cindy Gangstad of our church staff or Susan Bright who directs our preschool and give of your time and your finances so you can follow the example of Jesus and be great yourself in the Kingdom of God.

III. Mothers Can Be Great in the Kingdom of God.

Today is Mother’s Day. It’s a day when we honor the women who have sacrificed so much for us and served us in countless ways. By any measure of greatness, most would agree that mothers are great in the Kingdom of God, and it is their contribution in shaping the lives of children that affects this world as much as anything else. Someone once said, “The hand that rocks the cradle shapes the destiny of the world.”

A few years ago Rich Hardison wrote that on Mother's Day all over this country, grateful moms are pushed back into their pillows, the flower is snipped and put in a glass, and a strange assortment of food comes out of a kitchen. A mixer whirs, out of control, then stops abruptly as a voice cries, "I'm telling." A dog barks and another voice says, "Get his paws out of there. Mom has to eat that!" Minutes pass and finally, "Dad! Where's the chili sauce?" Then, "Don't you dare bleed on Mom's breakfast!"

The rest is a blur of banging doors, running water, and rapid footsteps. The breakfast is fairly standard: a water tumbler of juice, five pieces of black bacon, a mound of eggs that would feed a Marine division, and four pieces of cold toast. The kids line up by the bed to watch you eat and from time to time ask why you're not drinking your Kool-Aid or touching the cantaloupe with black olives on top spelling M-O-M.

Later in the day, after you have decided it's easier to move to a new house than clean the kitchen, you return to your bed where, if you're wise, you'll reflect on this day. For the first time, your children have given instead of received. They have offered up to you the sincerest form of flattery: trying to emulate what you do for them. And they have presented you with the greatest gift people can give: themselves.

There will be other Mother's Days and other gifts that will astound and amaze you. But not one of them will ever measure up to the sound of your children in the kitchen on Mother's Day whispering, "Don't you dare bleed on Mom's breakfast!"²



Have you ever heard of the laws of parenting?

- The later you stay up, the earlier your child will wake up the next morning.
- For a child to become clean, something else must become dirty.
- The longer it takes you to make a meal, the less your child will like it.
- The gooier the food, the more likely it is to end up on the carpet.
- If the shoe fits...it's expensive.³

Somebody said a mother is an unskilled laborer...somebody never gave a bath to a squirmy infant. Somebody said it takes about six weeks to get back to normal after you've had a baby... somebody doesn't know that once you're a mother, normal is history. Somebody said the hardest part of being a mother is labor and delivery...somebody never watched her "baby" get on the bus for the first day of kindergarten. Somebody said your mother knows you love her, so you don't need to tell her... somebody isn't a mother.

Mothers are great in the Kingdom of God, and we should tell them so today. This is a picture of my mother, Nona Barnes. My mother, The General as we called her, died five-and-a-half years ago, and I still have a hole in my heart. She was a deeply committed follower of Jesus, and of all the theologians I have read over the years, of all the professors and mentors I have been blessed to have, my mother is probably the greatest spiritual influence in my life.

Some of my earliest memories are of sitting on the dark wooden pews of the sanctuary of First Church Atlanta singing *Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty!* I remember playing with the pencils and drawing on the bulletin. She usually sat between my brother Bill and me so we wouldn't fight! She taught me how to pray, and she modeled in our home a devotion to God through the lighting of Advent candles at Christmas and other expressions of piety.

When as a teenager I gave my life to Christ, it was a culmination of a lot of little steps of faith that she helped me take as she taught me the things of God and why knowing the Lord and walking with Him daily was so very important. I realize now that my ministry today is in many ways simply an extension of the spiritual influence of my mother over the years.

When all the world around you is going wrong, when your boss or your congregation is nipping at your heels, when people are critical and make you feel like you don't measure up, when you aren't hired for that job when you thought you had such a great interview, or when you feel like your closest relationships are a disconnect – mom is always there for you with this unconditional love. She's always pulling for you; she is the great cheerleader, a faithful support through thick and thin. My mom sure was for me, and in my eyes she was one of the greatest people I ever knew.

Conclusion.

Late one evening, the famous evangelist D.L. Moody arrived home from a speaking engagement, and Emma, his wife, was already asleep. As her husband climbed into bed, she rolled over and asked, "How did it go tonight?"

"Pretty well," he replied. "Two and a half converts."

Emma lay silently for a moment thinking about his response, and then she smiled. "That's sweet. How old was the child?"

"No, no, no," Moody answered. "It was two children and one adult! The children have their whole lives in front of them. The adult's life is already half gone."⁴

What mental image came to your mind when I said "two and a half converts"? Did you picture what Emma Moody did: two grownups standing in front of an auditorium with a little child beside them? If you did, don't feel bad. I did, too, when I first heard the story. But this shows just how badly flawed our thinking is when it comes to the way Jesus measured greatness in the world.

There are two sets of measure on this ruler, and there are two sets of measure in the Kingdom of God. May we measure greatness the way Jesus did, one child at a time. Amen.

