



Second Sunday in Lent, February 25, 2018

Rev. Dr. Jean Halligan Vandergrift

Great to Good

Mark 9:30-37

INTRODUCTION

Jesus and the disciples are now making their way down from the northern border, south, toward Jerusalem. They pass through the region of Galilee and stay a while in Capernaum – the home of Peter and Andrew, James and John – the town where the Movement had begun. As with last Sunday's reading, for a second time, Jesus conveys that the course of the ministry will lead to conflict and the cross. They are still not sure what this means, and they don't ask Jesus any questions.

This group is, of course, always traveling by foot, and the distances give the members plenty of time to talk with each other. We can imagine that sometimes the topic might simply be the weather, but at other times, news of the families they have left behind, current political events, and the circumstances of the last healing or exorcism would come up. This may have led, in turn, to religious questions and dialogue. We can also assume that traveling like they were, they may have gotten on each other's nerves, and disagreements may have flared up. After all, there were at least two sets of brothers in the group!

Such is the case this time. It may have started rather playfully, but soon the disciples began to *argue* with one another over their status in the group and their relationships to Jesus. The topic was "Who is the greatest?" Once again, Jesus enters in to do remedial education, and he turned upside down *their* understanding of how the world works compared to *God's* understanding.

THE READING

30 They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He 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 about 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 it among them; and taking it 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.'

SERMON

Mark 9:30-37

"Great to Good"

The Rev. Dr. Jean Halligan Vandergrift
Trinitarian Congregational Church, Concord, MA
The Second Sunday in Lent, February 25, 2018

In the musical, *Annie Get Your Gun*, Annie Oakley and Frank Butler are about to face off in a sharpshooter contest, when they break into an Irving Berlin song. Like two little kids, they argue:

Anything you can do, I can do better;
I can do anything better than you;
Anything you can be, I can be greater;
Sooner or later, I'm greater than you!
No, you can't; Yes, I can; No, you can't; Yes, I can;
No, you can't; Yes, I can; Yes, I can!

Maybe it was something like this verbal sparring that Jesus overheard going on between the disciples as they walked from Caesarea Philippi to Capernaum. Mark says that they were arguing over whom among them was the greatest.

Wanting to be great and to be greater than others is a prevalent theme in our country and our world!

Why, the week I started studying this scripture text, the theme of greatness jumped out at me from all directions. During a single morning at the gym, from the elliptical, I first looked across at the magazine rack and spotted a *Sports Illustrated* issue, showcasing the career of Mohammed Ali – his handsome, younger self on the cover, under the banner, "The Greatest."¹ On one of the televisions in front of me, the President was talking about how the people in his staff who were under investigation were really "great people." Of course, the Olympics were also running on still another TV screen – athletes from all over the world competing to be the best.

¹*Sports Illustrated*, June 13, 2016.

When Jesus asked the disciples what they had been discussing with each other on the road, I think they were quiet because they were embarrassed. They probably couldn't quite look him in the eye – like our grand-dog, Chloe, when she knows that she's done something wrong. The disciples realized that this "greater-than-you" ego-game they had been playing did not match the way of the Messiah. Just last Sunday, Jesus had had to rebuke Peter, and he enjoined them all to reverse their instincts to win, promote themselves, protect him, and run away from risk, in order, instead, to lose and deny themselves, take up the cross, and follow him!

In 2001, Jim Collins wrote a bestseller for businesses and other organizations about leadership, entitled, *Good to Great*.² He researched good companies that had made the leap of performance to at least three times over the market for fifteen consecutive years, identifying seven principles to go by in growing from good to great. Some churches have been attracted to and experimented with Collins' findings. You see, in our culture, success is defined as climbing from good to great.

However, once again, Jesus goes against the grain; opposite to what is deep and dear to us. It was as if he was asking them to stand on their heads, or like Fred Astaire, to dance on the ceiling! He invites us all to adopt the utterly new paradigm of the first being last and servant of all – to live upside-down! **In other words, we might summarize the direction that the Christian life ought to take is from "great" to "good," from seeking to be the greatest to being the greatest servant of the greater good.**

So Jesus started right there where they were in their current beliefs in order to transform their beliefs. He knew that they were ambitious, so he beckoned them into being great at serving. Martin Luther King adopted the same strategy in his 1968 sermon, "The Drum-Major Instinct, preaching:" "If you want to be important, wonderful! If you want to be recognized, wonderful! If you want to be great, wonderful! But recognize that he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. That's a new definition of greatness," he continued. "And this morning, the thing that I like about it: by giving that definition of greatness, it means that everybody can be great, because everybody can serve."

There is an additional feature to this passage that intrigues me about how Jesus coaxed the disciples into this counter-cultural reign of God! At the same time that he was switching up their belief system, Jesus took a child of the household where they were and brought him into their circle. **He put a real child – a little human being – into the center of their conversation to help them practice this new belief.**

According to scholars, in the Greco-Roman world, children were considered non-persons, invisible, the lowest on the social scale. It was important, mind you, for citizens to have eventual heirs, but until they came of age, children were largely ignored. So for Jesus to value

²Jim Collins, *Good to Great* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2001).

and welcome them – for him to point to children as examples of God’s kingdom – was totally shocking!³

There, with an actual child in front of them, the disciples had the opportunity – as uncomfortable as it was – to practice this new belief system about the last being first; they could receive this little one, serve her needs, and practice going from great to good. Jesus’ object lesson forced them to look this young person in the eye, listen to her, and then do for her, which helped them to value her.

In the aftermath of the Parkland, Florida school shooting these last two weeks, it feels to me as if this criminal tragedy has put these children smack down in the middle of our country’s unproductive debates over violence. These articulate young people are looking directly at us and pleading with us to listen and to serve the greater good, to keep them safe, to turn from our complacency and change the course of this society from trying to be great by guns to being great servants of God’s idea of what is good! What will we do?

I heard of a church that wanted to practice being Christ’s servant church. First, they went out and interviewed the police chief in their community. Instead of simply complaining and criticizing, they asked him what he thought the community most needed and how they might help. He replied, “early childhood education,” and he pointed them to one of the school administrators for more input. The superintendent concurred with his assessment. She said that she would be able to find personnel, but the project would require space and some resources. Well, the church had space and some resources! As this church put the last first, all the pieces fell into place, and this congregation began to practice a deeper hospitality that, in turn, grew them from great to good!

³Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Mark – Interpretation Commentary* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1983), 170.