

Text: [Mark 9:30-37](#)
Date: November 24, 2019
Title: “Redefining Greatness” – Humility, Week 3
Theme: We can choose to either be somebody, or we can choose to do something.

Intro

Over the past few weeks, we’ve been talking about the importance of humility in the spiritual life
We’ve looked at pride, at how humility helps us navigate success and failure, and this week we’re talking about how we define greatness
Remember, you can always catch up when you miss a Sunday – the easiest way is through our app

Question

How do you define “greatness”?

1

It was Muhammad Ali who famously said,
“It’s hard to be humble when you’re as great as I am”
Now, that’s not the view of greatness we’re aiming for

In the sports world, you expect a certain level of bravado
But Ali’s went to the extreme
On some level, he had the skill to back it up

Sometimes, I have to admit, I have a lot more tolerance for someone’s ego
when I see that they can back it up
Reflecting on this, I don’t know that’s very helpful

I mean, ego is ego
At some point or another, it’s going to get you in trouble if you indulge it too much
Remember one of the lessons from the sermon two weeks ago:
Overconfidence and pride is a sure path to alienation and failure

2

The danger is always in thinking that you are somebody
There's a great book, called *Ego is the Enemy*, by Ryan Holiday that I've often referred back to in preparing these sermons
He tells some real-life stories illustrating an important principle:
We all have a choice in life – we can decide we want to “be somebody” or we can decide we want to “do something”

Have you ever noticed that some people have built a whole life around the notion of “being somebody”?
They chase promotions and advancement, but suspiciously don't leave a lot of tangible work product behind when they've vacated a role
They're good at making connections with the right people, though, so they keep moving ahead
“Being somebody” often comes at a cost – compromising your principles in stay in people's good graces

Other people make it a point to actually DO SOMETHING
They let the work speak for itself
They may not get noticed as much because they spend less time on self-promotion
But they aren't afraid to invest time in the people around them, to help them do better work too
Sometimes they criticize the organization in the interest of helping it to grow and do better – so they may not get promoted as often
Still, these are often people who provide leadership and influence, even when they don't have positions of formal authority
Even if they are not in the spotlight, the reality is that without them, the team or organization would be a lot less effective

3

Jesus taught his people to focus not on “being somebody” but on “doing something”

When he taught his disciples about greatness, he sat down
I hadn't noticed that in this passage before
Sitting was the formal teaching position of a rabbi
You didn't stand up to teach, you sat down

When Jesus realized that the disciples had been arguing with each other about who was the greatest, he sat down
Which tells me this next bit of what Jesus has to say is REALLY important
And he told them: “Whoever wants to be FIRST must be LEAST of all and the SERVANT of all”

Which begs the question – how do you do that?
Or, maybe more precisely, how do you do it without turning it into a competition – which seems to defeat the very purpose of humility
Otherwise, I might be tempted to brag about every mundane and lowly thing I did this week

I’d say, on some level, that the notion of being FIRST at all is set completely out of bounds by this teaching
Because Jesus renders it ridiculous – no one who wants to be first is going to strive to be the lowest or least!

So Jesus is essentially saying: that’s the wrong goal
Your goal instead is to be as helpful as you can, wherever you can, to serve everyone without asking who will get the credit

In other words, your goal is not to BE somebody
But to DO something

4

To illustrate, Jesus then took a small child – probably Simon Peter’s kid, because they were probably in Simon Peter’s house at Capernaum – and put the little one in front of them
If you welcome one of these little ones, he said, it’s like you’re welcoming me

Now, this requires us to understand a little bit about the culture
I’m sure people have always loved their kids

But in ancient times, people didn’t have this rosy view of childhood, where they talked about how “children are our future” or any of the things we say today

Remember that old idea of “children should be seen and not heard”?

It was more like that – often ignored, not treated with respect or care
If we are honest – we still have remnants of that thinking today, don't we?
Look on any social media post talking about teacher salaries
We still don't have a lot of respect for people whose work involves a lot of
interaction with kids – we just don't take the work very seriously –
especially when we're talking about very young kids
So much for "children are the future," right?

And so again, this child becomes an illustration
Here's what I think Jesus was getting at:

Have you ever noticed that a lot of what we think about as greatness
involves the idea of spending time with important people?
It's about what meetings you're in and whose parties you're invited to
attend
(That's why people like to drop names so much)
Jesus takes that notion and stands it on its head by bringing a child into the
picture

The world says we become great by spending time with important people
Jesus says we become great by spending time with people the world says
are unimportant
People like children, the poor, the sick, the vulnerable, the outsider

5

Friends, if your goal is to BE SOMEBODY, Jesus says you're going about
life the wrong way
The thing about being somebody is that experience very short-lived

Sometimes I'll see a performer on TV – someone I haven't seen in 10 years
– doing a commercial for something and I'll say to myself – does
anyone even remember this person anymore?
Or, think about this: after the CEO retires, does anyone call them up asking
to get together for lunch?
No. (Well, maybe fund-raisers.)
But the people in the organization move on.

You will only ever BE SOMEBODY until the day you're not – and you never
know how quickly that day might arrive

The goal isn't to BE SOMEBODY – that's an illusion
That's what gets us into arguments with each other over who is the
greatest.
That's what makes us sound like Muhammad Ali.

Instead, our goal is to DO SOMETHING.
To serve.
To invest ourselves in the work of making other people's lives better.
Whatever that looks like for us.

Every one of us is given a different set of gifts and will be drawn to working
with different groups of people.
Some of us will be called to work with kids.
Others with the disabled.
Or veterans.
Or people on the streets.

6

Yesterday, I visited one of our people who is in South Woods State Prison
John will get out in a little over a month – December 28
I'm not going to tell his whole story – that's for him to do and I know he
can't wait to do it – I want to give him the opportunity to do it

But I do want to celebrate that while he's been in, he's been able to begin a
college program – he even earned a scholarship for when he gets out
Which, he's told, is a first for students out of South Woods
That's not necessarily the point of my story, though I have to admit that
during my visit it brought tears to my eyes when I heard it

During my visit yesterday, I was wearing my collar
Which is unusual for me, I only do that when I really feel like I need the
extra authority that comes from wearing it
Yesterday, because of the collar, there was a woman was also there on a
visit who struck up a conversation with me
It turns out she is also United Methodist
She was there to visit her son, who has been in since he was 19
And she talked about how his experience started her on a path of doing
prison ministry through her church

Now, going into prisons is not for everyone
It's a stressful experience – even to visit

But she found that she felt called to work with prisoners
Because seeing her son as one gave her an empathy that she wouldn't
have discovered by any other means

If you want to talk about investing in people others say are unimportant
Is there any group of people we think of as less important than those we
send to prison?

This is the work that Jesus calls people to
Not to spend time with people others think important.
But to invest instead in people others say are unimportant.

Being somebody is the choice to build a persona that will last for a moment.
But doing something is the choice to make an impact that will last for
eternity.

This is the choice that Jesus offers us.

Amen.

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