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**St. Margaret's Church**  
**Pent 16, Proper 20 Mark 9: 30-37**  
**September 20, 2009**

*But the disciples were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, Amen.*

I have been blown away with the events of the past couple of weeks. First Serena Williams, one of the greatest tennis players of all time, blows up on the court at the US Open and yells at an umpire. Not only does she lose the match, she's out some \$10,000 and has certainly tarnished her reputation. Then Representative Joe Wilson from South Carolina interrupted the President's speech to Congress by yelling at him during his speech on healthcare. He literally pointed his finger and called him a liar. His web site crashed and he took a brutal beating from the public. Apparently he has apologized to the President. You music buffs will know this last one. The other night at the Video Music Awards, famous rapper Kanye West bound on the stage and interrupted the acceptance speech of a young artist saying that someone else should have won the award SHE was given.

The greatest. We all want to be the greatest. As little kids we know the GOLD star is the best. We strive for the gold medal, the best in show, or the biggest corner office. There is something about that word 'greatest' that stirs something within us. Greatness is certainly something we all aspire to. Something we care about. Something we want to be able to ascribe to our workplaces, our schools, our football teams, our children, our families, and our churches.

Who is the greatest? Are the events of this past week simply momentary breeches of protocol or lapses in judgment or moments when someone has forgotten their manners? Or are these events indicative of who we all are...people who think we are the best, that WE are the greatest?

This morning we hear Jesus tell his followers once again that he must be handed over and put to death and rise again on the third day. The disciples don't get it and they fail to ask him any questions. "Yea, yea Jesus. We hear you. You've said this before. Something about you have to die. But we'd rather argue with ourselves over who is the best. We don't want to look stupid in front of our friends and ask you what you're talking about. We'd rather look cool and pretend we understand rather than ask a question. And if you are going to die we've got to have a backup leader to take us forward."

But Jesus knows exactly what they're really talking about. He sits them down and it's time for a come to Jesus moment. He begins to teach them that being the greatest has nothing to do with yourself and everything to do with serving others. Greatness in the eyes of God is different than greatness in the eyes of our world. The problem is we're all too often much more like the disciples than we'd like to be.

A few things get in our way. True greatness in God's eyes is hindered by our pride. There is a great price that is involved with greatness. It is not hard work or long hours or philanthropy. Jesus says that when it comes to greatness, the up is down. The way over is under. You cannot ascend to greatness by exalting yourself. Rather greatness is all about humbling. A lesson that Serena, Joe, Kanye need to remember; a mandate we must remember. Greatness is not about lifting yourself up or our needs or opinions, but about lifting up Jesus and the body of Christ.

“If greatness means we relinquish [prideful] self centeredness, we have to ask ourselves some difficult questions. Have I been as concerned for the well being of my brother or sister in Christ as I have for my own personal needs? Have I cared more about the spread of the gospel than the spread of my personal wealth? Am I more concerned about the name of Christ than my own reputation? It is when we let go of our self centered thinking that we begin to find out what greatness is all about.”<sup>i</sup>

Jesus says to the disciples, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all." Jesus doesn't say we have to do something, he says we have to be something. Because we are deciding to be followers of Jesus, because we are participating in his ministry, we must be last. “Perhaps the answer requires us to wrestle with a familiar saying--saving the best for last--that has less to do with one's position or station in life. Being last has more to do with the idea that we have an opportunity to learn from those who have gone before us in hopes of building upon their efforts and perfecting our collective efforts over time. In Jesus' ministry, the community of disciples practices greatness by being observant learners of all.”<sup>ii</sup>

And just to make sure the disciples have learned their lesson, Jesus brings a child into the picture. Children always get our attention. Yet in that day and culture, a child symbolized a voiceless being. It is not this child's naïveté or innocence that is the focus, but rather his lowly status, one always under the thumb of someone older in authority. One without any rights. Jesus welcomes that little girl and wraps his arms around her. If we want to know what it is to be great in the eyes of God, then we must welcome the one on the margin on the margin of society into our community.

Now I don't think this necessarily means creating more Sunday School classes or expanding our Day School. Rather for us that means adopting new practices of insignificant greatness. We must teach our children what that is all about. “Because, ultimately, what is at stake is the church's future, its witness and its relevance in the world. A church that fails to be the welcoming presence of God ceases to be the church.”<sup>iii</sup> We must teach them that being great is not about the successes that our world judges. Being great is not about winning a championship tennis match or getting elected to a political position or winning a prestigious award from the entertainment industry.

Being great means putting aside our pride. We must go down deep to be willing to ask those difficult questions of faith no matter what our friends and family may think. And then we must listen to the voices of those we least expect may have some answers. Then

we are called to include them and wrap our arms around them and make them the center of our world.

In doing so we create a new chain of relationships. Welcome the outsider in my name, and you welcome me. Welcome me and you welcome no less than a one than God. A new fellowship of hospitality is born between the lowly child, Jesus and God.

This invitation to insignificant Christian greatness is not for the weak and the weary. If you are concerned about being popular then this is the wrong path for you. You could very well face a social crucifixion. You may lose some of your peers and maybe even some of your money.

But rest assured that by the abounding and steadfast Grace of Jesus Christ, we will be given the ability not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure. Then and only then, we too will be wrapped in the loving arms of the presence of God who is the greatest.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermon.asp?SermonID=53782&Page=1>

**The Greatest Sermon Ever Preached** by Howard Harden

Matthew 20:20-34

January 5, 2002

<sup>ii</sup> The Rev. Stephen Lewis is the National Director of the Calling Congregations initiative of the The Fund for Theological Education, based in Atlanta, GA. Insignificant Greatness. [http://day1.org/1435-insignificant\\_greatness.print](http://day1.org/1435-insignificant_greatness.print) Mark 9:30-37

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*