

“Greatness Embodied”  
by the Reverend Doctor Peter W. Allen  
Hingham Congregational Church, United Church of Christ  
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Mark 9:30-37

As we watch the Republican debates and read about the policy positions of the Democratic presidential candidates, the subject often comes up in our minds: *What does it take to be a good President of the United States?* The field of candidates is interesting because it includes one man who is completely convinced of his own greatness (no matter what anyone else says) and many others whose personas both reinforce and call into question their likability, their trustworthiness, their backbone, and their qualifications.

Fourteen months from now, we as a nation will have to choose from among them and I pray that that we will make a good choice.

What makes someone great, not just as a leader, but as sister or brother, a parent, a friend, an artist or inventor, an engineer, a community servant, a teacher, or a team member? Jesus famously instructed his followers to love their neighbors as themselves. What does it take to be a great neighbor, in the broadest sense of that word?

Surely, greatness, like beauty, is in the eye of beholder, but I think Jesus, here in the Gospel of Mark, gives us some clues as to how he would define it.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus predicts his own death three times. The story we heard this morning is the second instance and the author says that the disciples didn't understand it any more than they did the first time he told them. How could anyone think of killing their

amazing teacher, the savior of their lives, the wisest and most loving person any of them had ever known?

However, they immediately start arguing about which one of them is the greatest. There are different opinions out there, but it seems to me that they are already discussing a succession plan. If the Romans execute Jesus, which one of the disciples would best be qualified to take leadership of the movement?

If they were lobbying for themselves, I wonder what they were saying to one another? *I'm good as catching fish, and people are just like fish with legs? Healing the sick is kind of like mending nets?* Who knows what they were saying?

In any case, they had their own definitions of greatness and they were arguing about it.

How do you define greatness?

In high school, physical attractiveness and athletic ability seem to be the defining characteristics of greatness. Once we get to college, good grades and the ability to attract dates carry a little more weight.

Later, when we begin working for a living, the go-getters, the ones who are in the office early and leave late, are considered great new hires. Those who get things done, those who close deals are considered great. The great ones make a lot of money, often because the quality of their work rises above the norm. The great ones take calculated risks and they seem always to be right in their choices.

There are stonemasons and carpenters and architects and those who write computer code that show by their creations that they are great at their trades and professions. There are painters and poets and actors and musicians who blow us away with the beauty of their artistry.

We all know at least one supermom who shows her greatness by bringing home a paycheck, raising her kids with loving attentiveness and wisdom, while still finding the time to get to the gym.

Some people are givers of money and time and their generosity is what makes them great.

Of course, there are leaders amongst us that impress us with their ability to inspire and to guide individuals and groups to grow and to accomplish their goals.

I think all of those definitions of greatness are accurate – to a point.

Jesus responds to the disciples' debate about greatness by putting a child in their midst. What is he saying to them by doing that?

The best teachers often take the time to question and to deconstruct conventional wisdom and the accepted notions of their students. They do this to open their students' minds to new ideas, and I think that's what Jesus is doing here. Just like a kitchen cabinet, sometimes you have to clear out the food that's past its freshness date to make room for more relevant and nutritious fare.

By putting a child in their midst, Jesus is asking his disciples: *Do you think that greatness has to do with strength and accomplishments? Think again. Do you think that greatness has to do with exercising power over others and winning? Let's redefine greatness together.*

Since the disciples symbolize the church and we are at least one corner of the church, I think it's important to allow this story to call into question *our* notions of what it means to be great as well.

Last week, I visited with member of our church who spent ten years caring for his wife as she declined because of Alzheimer's. He met

her when they were seventeen years old and she died in August, when they were ninety-seven. Their eighty-year relationship was his top priority and he loved her with everything he had. When she got sick and couldn't care for herself any more, he refused to put her in a nursing home. He converted the dining room to a bedroom and did everything for her, including feeding her three meals a day, cleaning her, changing her, and bathing her. He never went to college and he is not wealthy. He does not have a lot to show, physically, for the years of hard work he put in to support his family. And yet, to me, he is the very definition of greatness.

Jesus says to his disciples, *Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.*

And when he takes the child in his arms, he says, *Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.*

By putting the child in their midst, Jesus questions their notions of greatness. And then, by taking the child in his arms and by his words, he redefines greatness for them. To Jesus, greatness is about humility and servanthood.

And it's about our willingness to welcome God into our lives, which we only do by recognizing our own vulnerability and our own need for God.

Jesus would eventually show his disciples his own greatness by going to the cross and sacrificing his body for them and for all of us. Both the child and Jesus, in their vulnerability, show us an alternative and ultimately life-giving definition of greatness. If being hospitable, if being a servant, if opening our hearts to God is what it takes, then greatness is something we can all achieve.

Amen