

TRUE GREATNESS
October 18, 2009 – Grace Episcopal Church – Haddonfield, NJ
Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

What is greatness? Is it important? Greatness is at the heart of the Gospel of Mark today. Jesus gives us definition of greatness, and it's probably not what we expect! What makes up greatness for us? Is it another World Series championship? Is it being the CEO of a fortune 100 company? Is it being in top political office like governor or president? Is greatness being one of the richest people in the world, a quarterback for a winning football team or a chief religious figure like a pope or bishop?

Jesus talks about the Gentile's way of viewing greatness ... and it has to do with "lording over others." This is the greatness marked by power, privilege, prestige, and sovereignty. This is the greatness motivated by personal ambition, climbing the ladder and the ways of the world. But where does it lead? It results in more struggle, hoarding and worry about protecting what we possess. It leads only to more insecurity.

But Jesus says ... "it is not so among you."

What is Jesus saying today? In mark's Gospel, we have James and John, part of the inner circle of the disciples, approaching him. These two were with Jesus on the mount at the Transfiguration; they are often with Jesus when important things happen. They come to Jesus and say, "We want ..." How often do we say those words? It might be more familiar to us as "I want." It's a self-centered approach. James and John know they are on the way to Jerusalem, and they want status and privilege. But the disciples just don't get what Jesus is all about. We don't understand Jesus either. He is not a political savior. He is not a warrior or politician who's going to bring back the good old day us.

Jesus responds to them and says it's not his decision. The other disciples overhear James and John and become angry! Here we go, the kids are fighting again! Remember how they were bickering a couple of weeks ago ... well, here they go again! They still don't understand who Jesus is and what he is all about. Jesus is coming closer to Jerusalem and he is trying to teach them to be a Godly community. What's Jesus trying to teach us today? Greatness is not what we think.

Christian greatness is different. What Jesus says to the disciples, and to us today, is that his way is about suffering, sacrifice (crucifixion) and humility. Jesus talks about taking our place at the back of the line, of standing in the background. To be one of his followers is to be someone who embraces generosity, loving and caring ... Jesus' way is about SERVING OTHERS.

This way is different from the world, and it leads us to a different place. Serving brings us closer to the Kingdom of god. In it we find peace, life and transformation! For us as Christians, greatness is about servanthood. Our pattern of ministry is one that follows Jesus' life and teaching. It's all about others first ... not us!

Paul Wadell, a professor of religion at St. Norbert College in Wisconsin, says greatness is not about being opportunistic, seeking our own pleasure, of ambition. He talks about greatness being magnanimous. It's about aspiring for the best of others. Wadell says we are called to magnanimity, to be big and great in spirit. The Christian life is a magnanimous life ... it is THE GIVING LIFE.

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Who is great among us? It's the single mother raising her children and they are okay. It's the volunteer who works quietly behind the scene to make sure things run smoothly. It's the teacher who stays extra hours to help a child succeed in school. It's the young person who asks that we pray for her friend who has cancer. It's the nurse who gives extra time at a free medical clinic. It's the woman who writes notes each week to the parish shut-ins. It's the man who rushes home from work to be the soccer coach for his kid's team. These are the truly great people.

Jesus is speaking about a new world, a new way of being for us. Jesus wants a godly community that cares, loves and serves others. This isn't surprising, because this is what Jesus did for us! **TRUE GREATNESS IS LIVED OUT IN SERVING OTHERS.**

Some of you may know the book Mitch Albom wrote, "The Five People You Meet in Heaven." The story was about a simple man he knew, his Uncle Eddie. He died at age 83. Mitch wrote to honor this unknown and unimportant man. The truth Mitch knew was that Eddie was more important than he thought. Eddie was the head of maintenance at the Ruby Pier Amusement Park at the beach.

He was a gruff old man, but did his job and underneath it all had a soft heart for the kids. One day, a ride cable snapped, sending a car crashing to ground towards a little girl. Eddie jumped in the way and shoved the little girl out of the way. He saved her from being crushed ... only to die himself. Eddie found himself awake in heaven. The book continues as he meets five people to whom he was important in their lives. Most of them had only crossed his life's path for a moment. He didn't know he was important to any of them. It's often that way for us as well.

They made a movie of this book; I think Jon Voigt was Eddie in it. The final scene of the movie has Eddie approaching Ruby Pier from the ocean. Hundreds of people are waiting to welcome him. Most are there because of the accidents he prevented. Others are there because Eddie saved their lives. There are children, and parents, and children of the children. Eddie is great because of the simple things he did every single day.

True greatness for us Christians is similar. Each day, each person we meet, every life encounter is an opportunity for greatness. Our call is to make a godly difference in another's life in the little ways ... and that's true greatness.

Greatness is not about being first or being at the top. James and John had it wrong. Greatness is about the number of people's lives we touch for the better. It's being like Jesus, about caring for others and making sacrifices for them. Greatness is measured by the moments of our lives where we give ... by serving, caring, and loving others. These moments are both known and unknown. They are made to the familiar and the stranger.

So ... just how great are we?