

“... to practice bold love of God and neighbor ...”

A sermon preached on Mark 9:30-37 by Emily Hull McGee
at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC on September 23, 2018

I.

We’re spending our September together unpacking our church’s new vision statement alongside the lectionary readings from the Gospel of Mark. I trust you’re learning our vision statement, right? So shall we practice it again together? *We are a community in the heart of the city called by Jesus to practice bold love of God and neighbor and boundless compassion for all people.* Together we have examined our identity and location, both physical and spiritual: “we are a community in the heart of the city.” Last week, we made clear our impetus, our unifier, our prime mover, for we are “called by Jesus.” So having laid the groundwork for who we are, and where we are, and why we are, we wonder together: *what is it that we’re supposed to do?*

Ever since the very first disciples gathered in fear in that locked room after Jesus’s death, communities of Christians have bound together to live the Christian life, modeling for those in countless generations to follow that the way of Christ is not a way traveled alone. For those earliest Christians, living the Christian life together in light of Jesus’s death and resurrection seemed rather straightforward. The Book of Acts tells us that “all who believed were together and hand things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the

goodwill of all the people.”¹ When Christians took the good news on the road, this pattern remained: the apostles would preach and teach, heal and fellowship, worship and tell again and again the story of God’s grace and goodness made known in Jesus of Nazareth. Simple and straightforward, right?

Several millennia later, this model for living the Christian life together through what we call ‘church’ seems to have gotten more complicated. For along the way, Christians found it helpful to have a space in which to gather, leaders to coordinate their common life and care for their souls, various programs or ministries through which to aid in their discipleship, partners to aid in their mission in the community, supplies and experiences to translate this old, old story into modern parlance.

And as the cultural landscape has grown and shifted around Christians, it seems understandable that followers of Jesus would want their church life to intersect with their secular life in some meaningful way. For some, that has meant their Christian life standing in direct opposition to the culture around them, insisting upon selective resistance to the pull of postmodern life. Still others desire their Christian experience to be fully assimilated within the culture, utilizing every contemporary bell and whistle at their disposal in order to be relevant to those they’re trying to reach. Many more try and locate themselves somewhere within those two poles, or even on a different plane altogether.²

¹ Acts 2:43-47

² This paradigm drawn wholeheartedly from Reinhold Niebuhr’s helpful classic, *Christ and Culture*.

But regardless of where one's Christian life or shared Christian experience falls within or around that scale, it seems we all are asking the same questions those first disciples seemed to ask in the haze of resurrection: *what does Jesus mean for my daily living? How am I – or how are we – to live most fully into our calling as disciples of Jesus and messengers of his good news? And either with or without the culture around us as a gauge, by what metrics should we measure to see how things are going?*

II.

These are timeless questions, or at least questions as old as the disciples. We meet them again today, and again, they seem a bit clueless. Again they're traveling through Galilee, again they're hearing Jesus teach and foretell how his life on earth will end, and again we're told that they just don't get it.

Why? Well as Mark tells the story, they leave for Capernaum, but along the way, Jesus overhears the disciples arguing amongst themselves. When Jesus asks them the nature of their argument, they fell as silent as they were when he told them of his impending death and resurrection. But Jesus knew they were fighting about rank and status, squabbling between them over who would be counted as the greatest. We don't know what they wanted to be greatest at – greatest follower or healer? Greatest storyteller or food-distributor? Greatest fisherman or tax-collector turned disciple? The text doesn't tell us. But even into their embarrassment, Jesus felt the need to make clear: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and a servant of all." You can practically hear in their silence their confusion, bewilderment, and wonder – *really, Jesus?*

III.

As you might imagine given the look of our property right now, the past couple of weeks around the church house have been.... well... interesting to say the least. Here we are – right smack in downtown, across the street from our local newspaper, thus invariably in front of God and everybody – acting on a decision years in the making by tearing down two-thirds of our facilities.

For some, the demolition has been a spectacle. People who may never or rarely have stopped in our vicinity have been making trips to 5th and Spruce, gawking at what they see. For others, it has been an invitation to hurl all manner of their wounded or angry thoughts at the church, almost as if in this outraged age, we are a stand-in for a number of very real pains that many have felt inflicted upon them – by institutions, by society, by God. And of course for so many of us, there is deep well of grief that inevitably accompanies the loss of spaces which have ushered in the presence of God.

But as my eyes flashed on the front page of Thursday's paper, I confess to you that I found myself feeling a fresh surge of hot anger and, if I'm being honest, a wounded ego. I'm confident that our friends at the Journal were simply trying to report the news, but it felt to me like they were taking the colors and sights and sounds and images that represent one of the hardest journeys our church has ever had to take, and splashing it on the front page to serve the eager master of sensationalism. *Greatness? Get a load of this!*

Measuring greatness in this day and age can be a tricky task. There are some who are sure there was a time when we once were great, and long to return us to such an era. There are others who buy into the idea that 'good is

the enemy of great,' that in order for an organization or idea to move from nothing special to something special, there has to be a certain magic of leadership and luck, potential and perchance. Many of us look around us to find examples of greatness — those who are giants in their fields, the powerful and successful and beautiful and well-resourced — and determine that in order to be great, we must be like those who are: we must have what they have, we must do what they do, we must prioritize what they prioritize.

And because the church is a *people* not a building, we the people bring all these ideas with us into our shared communion with Christ. If greatness looks like big homes and important jobs, good looks and lots of resources, power to get things done and the capacity to do them, then great churches should look similar! In order to be a great church, we must be a powerful one and a successful one, a beautiful one and a well-resourced one. Great churches have huge memberships! And big budgets! And lots of buildings! And any kind of program or ministry to meet my need, my neighbor's need, the guy on the corner's need, and my grandson's need! We tell ourselves, *surely that's what Jesus would want of us, right?*

But with a knowing smile and a firm word, Jesus looks at his disciples then and now to say, "whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." In Jesus's upside-down kingdom, the blind will see and the oppressed will go free; the lame will dance and the poor will be proclaimed the good news. In his kingdom, the proud will be made low and the lowly will be lifted up; the hungry will be filled and the thirsty will drink from the waters of life. In his kingdom, love is not just to be shared with your friends or families, love is to be given freely with your needy neighbors and your

worst enemies. In his kingdom, last is first, weak is strong, loss is gain, death leads to life, and least is the greatest. In his kingdom, it's the most vulnerable among us that Jesus gathers into his arms, saying "whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." This is a message that doesn't stand in opposition to the culture or assimilate within it; rather, this message is one so *countercultural*, that it utterly reorients and transforms all who are willing to hear.

I can't help but to wonder what the disciples were thinking: humbled by Jesus who called them to task and then sat among them with a young child in his lap. You see, unlike some corners of our culture today that I can feel subject to which revere children and orient life around their needs, children in 1st century Palestine were not so highly regarded. They were utterly vulnerable and dependent, they didn't afford their parents any additional economic value, nor could they add potential power or prestige to an adult's life. In fact, the Greek word Mark uses here for 'child' isn't far from the word he uses for 'servant,' connecting the two in the minds of the hearers as those of low social standing.³ "Whoever welcomes a *child*, welcomes Jesus — and by extension, God?," the disciples had to wonder. *That* is what greatness looks like?

Some two thousand years later, Jesus still offers a knowing smile and a firm word: yes. In God's eyes, greatness isn't about who you know, but who you love. Greatness is not about what you acquire for yourself, but what you

³ Great insights this week from Sharon Ringe, "Mark 9:30-37," *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 4*, p97.

give up for the sake of others. Greatness doesn't happen upon the powerful, but emerges in relationship with the powerless.

Pastor George Mason once said that our world often thinks of greatness as “the ability to separate ourselves from competitors, show our superiority and make sure everyone knows who's the best. It means winning at the expense of someone else. It means getting a deal in which you leave other parties knowing that they have lost.”⁴ But for us who claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus matters for our living and ask what metrics we should use to measure it, Jesus invites us to consider first the greatest of all the commandments: a call to love God and love neighbor.

Friends, I think we heard this particular call when listening for God's dream for our church. For we have said that we are a community in the heart of the city called by Jesus to what? *To practice bold love of God and neighbor.* To practice, submitting again and again to the process of being shaped by a greatness far deeper than we'd ever manage alone. It is a journey defined by how we love and serve each other, how bold our love for God and our neighbor might be, no matter who our neighbor is regardless of their age or gender, race or status, orientation or ability.

In weeks such as this one, I am profoundly grateful that our church has heard the call to be shaped by bold love of God and neighbor. I know I needed that reminder this week, and maybe you do too! Because **this** call demands a different set of metrics than those our culture would offer. This call is to a greatness that can't be found in leaders however effective, budgets however large, programs however meaningful, and yes, even buildings

⁴ Dr. George Mason, “Greatness Defined,” Wilshire Baptist Church, September 20, 2015: https://www.wilshirebc.org/download_file/view/3000/

however sacred. This call is one anchored in the Lord, the One who trains our eyes and our spirits on the least of these among us, tying his welcome to theirs.

IV.

My dear friend Garrett once told me a story about a tribe of Native Americans who lived a long time ago in the state of Mississippi. They lived next to a very swift and dangerous river. The current was so strong that if somebody happened to fall in or stumbled into it they could be swept away downstream. One day the tribe was attacked by a hostile group of settlers. The tribe found themselves outnumbered, their backs against the river with the only chance for escape to cross the rushing river. They huddled together and those who were strong picked up the weak and put them on their shoulders; the little children, the sick, the old and the infirm, those who were ill or wounded were carried on the backs of those who were strongest. They waded out into the river, and to their surprise they discovered that the weight on their shoulders carrying the least and the lowest helped them to keep their footing and to make it safely across the river.⁵

Brothers and sisters, we have an invitation before us today to step into the rivers of life following the One who says that greatness comes when first is last, when lowly are lifted up, when God and neighbor are loved above all else. It is one that promises to reorient our lives, our church, and yes even the world around us. And the question set before us is this: will we answer?

⁵ Story shared by dear friend Rev. Garrett Vickrey.