

World Communion Sunday Meditation
Preached by David D. Colby
Central Presbyterian Church
October 1, 2006
Scripture: Mark 9:30 - 37

What does it mean to be great? As the Minnesota Twins complete their fantastic comeback and prepare for the playoffs, their fans are celebrating. And as they celebrate, they often get into friendly passionate arguments about who was the greatest. Which of their playoff teams was the greatest Twins team? Who was the greatest pitcher, the best hitter, the most valuable player? Statistics are brought forth as support – the best batting average, the most home runs, the number of saves. New statistics are created – that all go toward measuring greatness.

Of course, this obsession with measuring greatness, or marking relative importance is not unique to baseball. Forbes magazine has an annual ranking of the wealthiest people in the world. Amazon.com gives you up to the minute rankings of the greatest books, as measured by quantity sold. In this season, even do not call lists cannot seem to prevent the ubiquitous political polls – daily measuring who is the greatest of the candidates. And, in perhaps their most embarrassing moment, Jesus caught the disciples arguing about this same question – arguing about who was greatest.

The gospel of Mark records this scene. If it had happened today, rivals might well have been taping the event and put it on the internet home video website YouTube. Jesus had just performed a miracle – the healing of a boy who had had from birth, as the gospel puts it, “an unclean spirit” – that is described much like a violent case of epilepsy. That healing would forever change the life of that young boy and his family. After being thanked profusely, Jesus and the disciples leave. And as they walk together Jesus teaches them about what his life will come to be. Maybe they did not want to hear it. Maybe they thought Jesus was simply trying to downplay his miraculous healing. Maybe they didn’t understand what he was saying. But Jesus was trying to tell them that he would be betrayed and killed. And the disciples are arguing with one another who was the greatest.

What an embarrassing moment – like caught sleeping in class, or zooming past a speed trap, or responding to an “I love you,” with “what was that, sorry, I wasn’t listening.” Jesus was trying to tell them that he would be betrayed and killed, but would rise again. And the disciples are arguing with one another who was the greatest.

In our story for today, the gospel of Mark says, “they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.” You might ask, “Who was the greatest what?” In fact, lots of people must have asked this question because both Matthew and Luke try to answer that question in the way they retell this same incident. Matthew paints the disciples in a much better light, separating this story from Jesus’ teaching about his suffering and having the disciples come to Jesus and ask a theological question: “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of

heaven?” (Matthew 18:1-5). Luke sticks closer to our story in Mark, and says “an argument arose among them as to which one of them was the greatest. But Jesus, aware of their inner thoughts” responds by picking up the child (Luke 9:46-48).

No matter which version of the story you like best, in each case, Jesus radically subverts the disciples’ topic of conversation with a startling answer. Who is the greatest? And through word and in deed, he gives them and us a new definition of greatness. But before you hear what he did – remember that old axiom children are to be seen and not heard? In the Middle Eastern culture of his time, children were the lowest of the low on the social totem pole. Who is the greatest, the disciples ask? And Jesus picks up a child and put it among them, and says, “truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”

He never quite answers their question. He doesn’t say that the topic is out of bounds, or unfaithful. He simply changes their perspective. He takes that topic from the high lofty level of kings and media darlings, and places that topic right at the eye level of a child.

You want to know what greatness is all about? You better have a child in your midst, or in your imagination, as you ask that question. Greatness, measured by a child’s perspective. And you start to realize that greatness isn’t about wealth and big muscles. It’s about trust, and compassion, and being willing to bend low and listen.

A society that cares about greatness better ask the question, “so how are the children?” Churches in the Twin Cities created Congregations Concerned for Children to pose exactly that question.¹

Churches that care about nurturing disciples for today ought to remember that greatness requires caring for the children in our midst. We do ritually and symbolically during baptisms like last Sunday when we baptized Zachary. And we do that in using all the resources of this congregation – our space, our dollars, our volunteer time - to house homeless children and their parents in November. “Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it,” Jesus told the disciples.

I am so pleased that the Session at Central put a high priority on hiring a part-time Director of Christian Education. And I am so pleased about the results of the search committee process – and Dean Seal’s arrival here at Central. I cannot articulate how proud I was of the work that that search committee did – good theology, really, as they developed a job description and formulated questions of the candidates.

“We minister to and with very diverse families,” the committee emphasized. And they asked specific personal questions to the candidates. “I want my children who are of African heritage to know that they are loved – so tell me how you might plan educational activities that encourage them to see themselves as created in God’s image.” Another member of the search committee asked candidates how they would approach families of two religions with understanding and respect for other faiths and cultures.

And by valuing diverse families and asking these kinds of questions, great energy developed among the committee to take more concrete steps to make this church welcoming of all children. Already you will see some changes as a result. Dean and the children and youth are downstairs enjoying a Middle East Feast – eating authentic food that Jesus might have eaten while Dean tells stories about food from the Bible. Downstairs we have a new exhibit of the Chinese Christian artist He Qi’s prints. Set between the eye level of adults and young children, we want all of us to encounter Jesus in full color and help us transcend our specific culture. Art, much like in our music, and our preaching, and in the Bible stories we read – should expand our concept of Jesus for children and adults. Dean will help teachers, volunteers, and all of us to keep in mind Jesus’ words that “Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”

A few verses later, Jesus went on to say, “if any put a stumbling block in front one of these little ones . . . it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea” (Mark 9:42). And so the church, in our attempts to be faithful to Jesus, has always had an expansive view that all children are to be protected and nurtured. We cannot say that *those* kids belong to somebody else and we need to care about *our* kids. Because with Jesus’ words echoing in our ears, there can be no our kids versus their kids. No us versus them. Just children of God.

And that is why we receive a special peacemaking offering this morning. To promote peace locally, regionally, and around the globe. We are all God’s children. We are all part of God’s family.

And that is why we gather around this table. It is not our table. It is not a Presbyterian table. It belongs to all. For here, at this table, we remember that Jesus ate with sinners and outcasts. It was at his table that distinctions of class and race and gender and religion broke down and as the meal was shared, Christ’s love was made manifest, calling into being a new community.

And at that table, as food was passed around, I am sure jokes were told, and smiles were frequent. I would guess that once in a while, those gathered argued about what was the greatest story ever told, or who was the greatest cook. But if those arguments about greatness ever got too heated or too serious – I bet Jesus took one of the kids and before he could even pick her up the disciples remembered that at Jesus’ table all are welcome: young and old, short and tall, black and white and people of every hue of skin color imaginable. You see, at Jesus’ table, everyone is great, and all are needed.

¹ For more information, see their website at www.cccan.advocateoffice.com