

Re-thinking Our Concept of Greatness—Mark 9:30-37

What does it mean to be great?

Images of greatness flash across our phone and computer and television screens every single day.

This past week a Kenyan runner, (*Eleood Kipjoje*) broke the world record in the marathon by over a minute—a **great** achievement—and he foreshadowed the day, not far off, when a runner will run the marathon in less than two hours.

Countless people have become **great** in the past week saving lives, saving communities, saving homes, saving animals in the deadly hurricane and its subsequent torrential rain and flooding.

How many people on the east coast and other locales have become **great** by letting their fears say their prayers and throwing themselves into rescue efforts!

Assuming he lives through the experience, a young Japanese entrepreneur, **Yusaka Maezawa**, will become **great** in the near future when he becomes the first private passenger on a Space X rocket to the moon.

Muhammad Ali is still known as “The Greatest”.

Named one of the 100 influential people in the world by Time Magazine, **Barbara Lynch** may be the world’s **greatest** restaurateur.

In a negative way, the Great Recession, ten years ago now, is still creating tides of economic woe today in the form of skyrocketing student loan debt, reduced pensions, wiped out pensions, and “not-living wages” even in a time of near full employment.

The greatness of that economic downturn is found in its massive, long lasting impact.

But greatness also belongs to the realm of ordinary everyday living,
How, you might ask?

In our Bible story today, when Jesus found his closest disciples, Peter, James and John, arguing about which one of them was the **greatest**, he challenged them to **rethink their concept of greatness**.

I think we would all be helped by **rethinking our concept of greatness**.

Greatness is not found in external, material, physical successes in life.

Quite the opposite.

Greatness is measured internally.

For example, whether you realize it or not, **every one of you has available to you great hours to live through**.

Hours in which we felt you were truly happy to be alive.

Hours in which you realized you were truly loved!

And hours in which you became aware that you truly loved someone else.

How many of you have lived through great hours in profession and work!

In parenting!

When a child—a young child or an adult child—made you happy!

In education when you realize you have really learned how to do something important and meaningful!

I'm a big believer in the idea that some of our greatest hours come to us when we are young and relatively inexperienced. We see young people

do something in school, a spelling bee, Sunday School or a church youth group, some math or robotics effort, or scouting, athletics, 4-H, and so on.

I took a photo a couple years ago of a baseball diamond that I emailed to my brother, with the caption: **"The Site of the Greatest Baseball Game in Family History"**, because there my younger brother ruined my budding pitching career with a home run, a triple and a single in a Little League Championship Game.

And not only do I think that a certain kind of greatness can be achieved at a very young age; **but also**, you may realize how that hour of greatness can become a brightly lit hour by which you can live and draw inspiration and power and direction the whole rest of your life.

Along with great hours to live by, I also believe you can experience greatness through acquiring great qualities of character and spirit.

Think, for instance of people whom you have known who are trustworthy.

Think of people who overflow with the milk of human kindness.

Surely you have known people who are well known for their honesty and candor. They would never think of presenting a false front, engaging in back stabbing, or being dishonest.

And then in the realm of the spirit, there are those who have managed to acquire faithfulness, meaning they act faithfully in the face life's fears and worries and hours of frantic searching for some heretofore hidden answer to one of life's urgent and important questions.

Haven't you known people who, perhaps unbeknownst to the world at large, were great because they had developed great faithfulness toward God, looking for God's presence, not only in worship and the intentionally holy times, but also in the course of their ordinary days ?

Or because they had acquired a great hope in God's providing activity in their lives and in the important endeavors and works of their days?

Last Tuesday, there was a nationwide protest against sexual harassment at McDonald's. Many workers walked off the job for a day in solidarity with a lawsuit filed in Chicago. It's the #MeToo for \$15 and a union movement.

The next day and on Thursday, I joined a number of people in accompanying striking workers back to their workplaces. One of the women I accompanied does every job there is to do at a local fast food restaurant—counter, cooking, cleanup, drive through—everything. As we talked before her 9 am shift began, I realized she was the outstanding public speaker I heard in Jefferson City at a Poor Peoples Campaign rally early last summer.

Her speech to a large crowd, was powerful and convincing.

Just before we accompanied her inside, she wanted to tell us about her son's high school football game on Friday night.

I think she has achieved greatness through the qualities of her character and spirit.

I could say the same thing of the young woman we accompanied to Starbucks on Main on Thursday morning, as she spoke with me and Rev. Stan Runnels of St. Paul Episcopal. She had walked out for a day, not because of Starbucks, but in a sign of solidarity with the McDonald's MeToo movement.

This leads to another dimension of greatness that Jesus lifted up in the passage in Mark, our central text for today.

Remember? Jesus told his three closest disciples that to be truly great, you had to acquire humility, practice service to others and hospitality to others.

"If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." he said. Then he took a child in his arms and said, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me."

So there you have it:

Humility!

Servanthood!

Hospitality!

Makes a person great!

And makes a congregation of Jesus disciples great!

Now someone might be thinking at this point that humility, servant hood and hospitality are not very great ambitions for a person to have. As we think about how the world defines greatness, how we all define greatness to a large extent, or what we might want for our children, these qualities are not necessarily what we would place at the top of the list.

And yet if we are going to pay any attention at all to the teachings of our Leader, Jesus Christ, we can't get around the fact that he thought supreme greatness has to do with being a servant of others.

He thought that greatness came through practicing hospitality to children, and in his day, children were given far less value than most people give children today. It would be as if, today—he took a 14 year old girl forced into marriage or a 12 year old boy forced to be a soldier or an immigrant child stuck in one of these detention centers—and placed them into the middle of some national debate, and said, “Whomever welcomes them, welcomes me.”

That's the big picture. So how do we get there?

By rethinking our concept of greatness in the more personal realms of our lives?

Which leads to these concluding thoughts:

If we were to take this action of Jesus' with the child and the disciples, and translate it into a modern lesson that we could go out and apply every day, it might look something like this adaptation of a motivational speaker's message:

Talk to people who can't do anything for you.

Be kind to people who can't do anything for you.

Encourage others to tell their own story.

Promote ideas other than your own.

Praise God for all your successes—

And thank God for every opportunity to correct your own faults.

This is the challenging path to true greatness. Amen.

Rev. Scott Myers

Westport Presbyterian Church

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