

## “ReLent: Pride”

Mark 9:30-37

March 21, 2021

Do you remember Holden Caulfield? He’s the cynical, sensitive, insightful teenager who narrates JD Salinger’s classic novel *Catcher in the Rye*. I was thinking of Holden this week because of one tender moment in the story when he describes a time when he refused to let his little brother, Allie, tag along on an adventure with the older kids. As he reflects, Holden speaks out loud to Allie, who had died of Leukemia at age eleven, repenting of his exclusion and inviting him to join the gang of older kids. Sadness washes over him and Holden explains that he felt like praying but he couldn’t bring himself to do it. Then these words: “I like Jesus and all, but I don’t care too much for most of the other stuff in the Bible. Take the Disciples, for instance. They annoy the hell out of me, if you want to know the truth. They were all right after Jesus was dead and all, but while He was alive, they were about as much use to Him as a hole in the head. All they did was keep letting Him down. I like almost anybody in the Bible better than the Disciples.”<sup>i</sup>

I wonder if Holden Caulfield read the Gospel of Mark. The disciples’ behavior in this morning’s encounter fits a larger theme that runs throughout Mark’s story. The disciples regularly appear clueless. Either through ignorance or willful denial, they avoid all the most challenging messages and often do the opposite of what they’ve been taught. In this morning’s text, they are traveling with Jesus, who is on his way to Jerusalem and preparing to face the final week of his life. As they pass through Galilee, Jesus quietly gathers his disciples and begins to share with them, not for the first time, a picture of what is to come. Maybe Jesus was hoping to strengthen them for the experience of loss—*forewarned is forearmed*. But I do wonder if it was more than that; I wonder

if Jesus hoped to be encouraged by his disciples. I wonder if the heaviness of carrying this burden alone had become too great to shoulder. I wonder if Jesus needed the disciples to be his friends. What he shared with them was harrowing and heart-wrenching. He used words like betray and kill. Jesus did not hold back from those who knew him best.

But the disciples did not respond with empathy or curiosity—at least, not out loud. Mark is clear—they did not understand and they were afraid to ask. As useful to Jesus as a hole in the head. Why were they afraid? Were they nervous about how Jesus might respond to their obtuseness? Were they terrified by the possibility that his fate might also be theirs? For whatever reason, they were afraid to go *there* (that deep, vulnerable, difficult place) with Jesus. They inquired no further of Jesus on the matter. Opportunity lost.

Even worse, the disciples argue among themselves. When Jesus asks them what all the arguing was about, they are silent, again. This time, we know why. The subject of their debate was greatness, success—more specifically, which one of them was highest on the list. After all, they had been through, all they had seen Jesus do, and all they had heard him teach...how could they be so obsessed with their own greatness? How could they be so filled with pride?

It is at this point that we might be most prone to agree with Holden Caulfield. Those annoying disciples are of no use to Jesus. But there is an uncomfortable upshot to this interpretation. In the gospels, the disciples represent the church, the followers of Jesus. In other words, *they* are *us*. Rather than judge from a safe distance, we are meant to

identify, to see the disciples as a mirror. In this case, they mirror our own self-centered pride. I told you it was uncomfortable.

Like the disciples, our obsession with greatness is instinctual. Whether the subject at hand is our nation, our career, our family, our college basketball team (please go easy on me this March), or our personal achievements, we want to be great, greater, greatest. As we confessed in prayer last Sunday, we are incurable scorekeepers. We want to know where we rank, how we compare, what score we've earned on the scale of greatness. This is the burden of pride that we carry. Self-importance, arrogance, narcissism, egotism. Call it what you want, it defines much of the culture in which we live, even creeping into the church where we find ourselves in endless comparison and attendant evaluation. Every corner of our lives has been touched by this grasping for greatness. We applaud it in our children and demand it in ourselves. And, when greatness is defined by comparison to others, we learn that you can lift yourself up by tearing others down. This is true for individuals as it is for nations and churches. Mark doesn't record the content of the conversation between the disciples on the road, but it would be interesting to fill in his gaps. What were they arguing about on the way? What were the assumptions about greatness, and how one acquires it? Did it mean being in "first place" among the disciples—winning the most converts, preaching the best sermons, suffering more, spending the most time with Jesus? And what about us? On which topics do our prideful debates center?

They wouldn't tell him what they were arguing about, but Jesus knew. He always seems to know. And so, Jesus sits down and begins to teach his disciples (remember, that's us) about what is most important. What I find interesting is that Jesus does *not* reject or criticize the disciples' desire to be first in line or greatest of all. He implicitly accepts greatness as a worthy (or perhaps inevitable) goal, and then he *completely* reverses what the word means.

So what is the meaning of greatness in the kingdom of God that Jesus embodies? This is where the teaching turns tough. It is both humility (last of all) and servanthood (servant of all). In both cases, the radical teaching is that followers of Jesus lift themselves up only by lifting others up. It is a statement that defines the teaching of Jesus and his own life. The last will be first, and the first will be last. Any who want to be my disciples must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me. Whoever wants to be first must be the servant of all. You also must wash one another's feet. Those who wish to save their lives must lose them. All those who humble themselves will be exalted.

That's just a partial list, but I think it fair to say that humility and servanthood stand at the heart of the Gospel. I also think it fair to say that they are bizarre and mystifying commands for we who belong to the 21st-century and encounter its emphasis on self-promotion. In a culture of endless cutthroat competition, we are required to lift ourselves in order to get into the best schools and be considered for the best jobs. Humility has almost no place in our time. And in far too many cases, self-promotion becomes other-demotion; our effort to get to the top requires pushing others down or out. This is the tension in which people of Christian faith live—radically different understandings of greatness that collide and compete within and among us. If we're honest, we must confess that too often we capitulate to cultural conceptions of greatness. We justify and rationalize the approach, but deep down we know something is off, something isn't right.

Perhaps recognizing how hard this teaching is for us, Jesus offers a visual representation—he doesn't just tell us, he shows us what he means. He lifts a child onto his lap and says, "If you welcome one such child...you welcome me." In the First Century, children had no status, no honor, no innate value. So, as much as we love this picture of Jesus pulling a child onto his lap and calling his disciples to welcome children, its meaning can be lost on us. The

only place I can think of where we might see a similar reaction is on an airplane. I speak from personal experience. Those who watched Jesus would *not* have been oohing and awing over the child. They would have been frowning and scowling. We know this because it's precisely what they do one chapter later when people bring children to Jesus. Old habits die hard. As useful to him as a hole in the head.

I think Jesus is teaching us something radical here about discipleship, and the lesson is this: living as a disciple means serving and welcoming without regard to worldly honor or so-called status. The lesson is this: being a follower of Jesus means putting aside our pride to live as servants of one another. Welcoming a child is one example. Washing the feet of his disciples is another. If Jesus were to gather a group of 21st-century disciples, he would choose a different person to welcome, someone whose very identity is seen as a rationale for rejection, someone whose presence is perceived as a nuisance...or a threat. Jesus is always upsetting the rules of engagement, upending settled definitions of greatness. Jesus is always welcoming people we may not choose to have at the table. Jesus is always asking us to take a good, hard look at how we see one another. My friend Meg Peery McLaughlin puts it this way: "Jesus would want us to notice all the people who always come second to our own self-interest...all who are precious in his sight. He'd want us to see them that way, too. He'd want us to see them and serve them—see their inclusion and well-being as our success."<sup>ii</sup>

It begins with relenting our pride. It begins when we choose to see with God's eyes and act on the urges of faith rather than the demands of the ego. Though the disciples are too embarrassed to ask the question out loud, Jesus has an answer to the debate about who is the greatest...whoever welcomes. Whoever welcomes one such person in my name, welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me welcomes the one

who sent me. It is greatness redefined in the light of the Gospel.

We will see this truth on display as we journey on. Remember, Jesus and his disciples are on the move. Their destination is Jerusalem. While the disciples may misunderstand, refuse to believe, or simply ignore his message, Jesus is on his way to the cross. There, he will demonstrate in humble and sacrificial love the true meaning of greatness. Faith, hope, and love persist. Everything else is a deceptive illusion. And the greatest of these is love. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*, chapter fourteen.

<sup>ii</sup> Meg Peery McLaughlin, "Insignificant Greatness," June 24, 2012