

First Presbyterian Church
Cheyenne, Wyoming
September 20, 2009
Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: Who is The Greatest?

Proverbs 31: 10-31, James 3: 13-18, Mark 9: 30-37

Answering the question of “Who is the Greatest?” has been a quest humanity and even nature has been on since the beginning of time. It has positive and negative connotations. On the positive side, searching for the greatest can mean seeking the best person to be the leader of a nation or in the case of the animals, the healthiest alpha male or female to lead the pack.

Even more on the positive side, deciding “Who is the Greatest,” can also be fun. I love to watch the sports programs that show the greatest catches or greatest moments in athletic history. Now the Broncos can add to these shows with “immaculate deflection.” It is a stitch to watch young children compete to see who can jump the highest or run the fastest. Deciding “Who is the Greatest,” can be lots of fun.

On the negative side, answering the question of “Who is the Greatest?” has led to wars, divisions in families, in churches, in schools, to failures of businesses and nations. I would venture that it was part of the original sin where Adam and Eve wanted to become just like or even above God. The quest to solve the question of “Who is the Greatest?” is something I suspect we all do as we wrestle with who will be in charge of our lives. Will it be God, ourselves, someone or something else? If the answer is anyone or thing other than God, life and the answer to the question, “Who is the Greatest?” can become very negative.

Jesus took the question of “Who is the Greatest?” beyond the positive and negative values and stood it on its head. We can thank the disciples for this. They were so much like us it is not funny. Jesus had just told them his future. “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again. But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.” They had been told this before and it still did not sink in. Of course it is nearly impossible to comprehend that your leader is going to die. It is a shock at first to learn that a parent, spouse, child, or friend is going to die. Yes, we are often afraid like the disciples were to ask what this means or what is wrong or to say, “I do not understand.” Even after 39 years in the ministry, I am still stunned with disbelief when I am told that a church member has an incurable disease and may live only a short time. So

I understand the disciples’ shock and even denial of what Jesus told them.

What I do not understand is what really crossed their minds and hearts—who would replace Jesus as the greatest leader. As a Twenty-first Century Christian this seems to be an insane question. How can any human replace Jesus Christ as leader, as our Lord and Savior, and God with us? When I thought about this further as I wrote this sermon I realized that each person I know is the greatest person for who they are. When I think of your name or see you, you are the greatest person for the place you have in my life. When you are away you are missed. So when someone I know dies,

that particular greatest spot is left very empty. This is what I think the disciples should have been thinking when Jesus, as their leader, their Lord and Savior, the greatest person ever in their lives suddenly revealed that he would die which would leave a huge gap in their lives. Yet, at that moment the disciples did not fully comprehend Jesus in that way. So, there they were, trying to fill the leadership gap with a debate on who was the greatest among them to do this.

Unbeknownst to the disciples, Jesus overheard their arguing and he called them on it. Have you ever talked about someone when you thought they could not hear you, but they could and brought it to your attention. Oh my! At this moment, Jesus began to turn the question of "Who is the Greatest?" beyond the positive and negative values and stand it on its head. He said, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." We have heard this many times before, but give it a few seconds of thought, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Hmmm. This concept of "Who is the Greatest," sounds like there is humility, service and suffering involved as opposed to the glorification and adulation that usually comes with such lofty title. The disciples pondered these words of Jesus just as we need to do as well.

Jesus then gave the disciples another shock when he took a little child into his arms and held him or her close to him. This may not be shocking to us because we treasure our children and give them great status in our society. "However, the child in the first century AD was a non-person. This child should have been with the women, not hanging around the teacher and his students. For Jesus to insist that welcoming this little child to these male disciples was almost inconceivable. Roman authors convey little information about children prior to adolescence, when they enter into adulthood. There appears to have been little interest in children as such, even among medical writers. Childless Romans who needed heirs commonly adopted adults rather than children." So when Jesus he took a little child into his arms and held him or her close to him it was a shock to the disciples. TNIBC Vol. VIII pg. 637

A further upset of what "Who is the Greatest," means came when Jesus said that this child in his arms was "an example of the kind of discipleship he is talking about. The connection is not readily clear." Rev. Bass Mitchell, a United Methodist Minister shares some of the best ideas I have found on what Jesus meant here. He "believes Jesus is saying that the greatest disciples or followers or persons are ones who may seem the smallest and weakest, and do not aspire to positions of status or power any more than a child can. This may lead many to look down on them, to think poorly of them, not to welcome and embrace them because they do not seem powerful or worthy. To the contrary, the little ones, the lowly ones are the most worthy of all! They are little in the sense of power and prestige, but big in terms of their hearts and their service to God and others. To welcome such lowly servants is to welcome Christ himself, for that is what he is and bids us all to be. Rev. Bass thinks Jesus is dealing here with the perception that being a servant is a bad thing, a role no one should want to assume. But Jesus is saying the opposite -- it is a position of the greatest honor and one we should eagerly embrace. Indeed, the lowliest servants are the ones among us we should most honor and model our own lives after, even though they would not seek or even wish that for themselves."

“Another possible meaning here is that the true disciple does not shrug from serving anyone, even the lowliest person, and even if that person can do nothing in return for you. Children and women both were considered almost non-persons in those days. They were the least among them. Yet, in the sight of Jesus, they were precious and valuable. This is what being a servant means -- serving without any thought of reward. For a child cannot reward you, not in any monetary or prestigious way. Serve with no thought of gain, especially serve those looked down on most by society,” seems to be the point Jesus was making. “Emphasis,” September 21, 2003

Of course all of this points back to Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who, indeed as the greatest, serves us as the lowliest of servants by dying as a criminal for our sins, and being totally dependent upon God for his resurrection.

This understanding of “Who is the Greatest” leads us to the sometimes controversial Old Testament Lesson from Proverbs 31. This passage also turns the idea of who is the greatest on its head. When it was written, 300 years before Jesus came to earth, and in the time of Jesus, women were considered property of men. Like children, they were almost non-persons. It is important to remember that Jesus did not believe or practice this horrible view, but preached and practiced treating all people equally as precious children of God. He expects the same of us today.

The passage from Proverbs reflects the responsibilities women often had as wives and mothers some 2000 years ago. It was part of the lecture Lady Wisdom in Proverbs gave to young men of that time when they were to consider a woman to marry. On one hand, this passage has been used to keep women barefoot, pregnant and in the kitchen. I don't think this was its intention. On the other hand it can be seen as a passage of great praise to women for the humble and sacrificial lives they led for the sake of their families. It praises them for the wise ways in which they balanced family life and commerce. They knew how to shop and haggle to get the best price and product from the men who ran the market. They were praised for being intelligently resourceful. Proverbs 31 praises them for their compassion to the poor and needy. It praises them for their maturity and wisdom. It praises them most highly for their trust and faith in God. It advises the young man not to chose a wife by her outward appearance, but to get to know her heart, spirit, intellect and faith above all else.

Proverbs 31 could also be seen as a statement of protest against treating woman as second class people. It lifts them up to be the unsung heroes, the greatest of servants, the warriors of the home, and the most vital persons in the society of that time. It was a word to the wise for the young men. Even though you may be considered the greatest in society, the truth is that your mom, and your wife are really greater in the eyes of God. It would be wise to appreciate what they do, follow their ways of making God first in their lives, and to take care of your family as well as they do. Even today, Jewish men read this passage to their wives during Passover in praise and thanksgiving to them. It reminds me of all the wonderful things my wife does for me so that I am available to minister to you. I suspect that not every woman then was such a humble, and wise servant to her family, just as many men did not appreciate their wives or moms or even deserve them. But, again, this passage illustrates what Jesus

was teaching about when he said, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Proverbs 31 also upset the concept of "Who is the Greatest."

So what about us, today as followers of Jesus Christ, as spouses, parents and children? We live in a very competitive world where nations, companies, individuals and even churches think it is wise to walk all over each other to be the "greatest." As James says, this leads to "bitter envy and selfish ambition in our hearts." We become "boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish." In this competitive world, it is so easy to get sucked into this mode of thinking and forget that our Lord and Savior taught and lived, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

James says, if we are truly people who are willing to be last, be servants of the Lord and of one another, we will "show by our good life that our works are done with gentleness born of wisdom." This is wisdom that comes from reading the teachings of Jesus, allowing him to be the leader or greatest one in our lives, and then living out what he wants us to do. This is "wisdom from above." Such "wisdom is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace." This not at all easy to do, but do it we must.

Guess what, even if we do all this, we still will not be the greatest, nor should that matter at all. We are to live this way in humble response to the love, generosity, wisdom, kindness and sacrifices of the one who is and always will be the greatest, God in Jesus Christ, humble servant of all.