

Sermon Pentecost 18B
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All Saints, Mt. Pleasant
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Mark 9:30-37

Jesus' teaching and action in this text are directed to the church whenever it is seduced by the world's definition of greatness: prestige, power, influence, and money. The antidote to such a concern for greatness is servanthood. The Holy Gospel According to Mark [Jesus and the disciples went on] and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "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. Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

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Whether it's the highest polling numbers, the top score, the best reviews and most likes, or the highest batting average on the sandlot, deep down, everybody wants to be the GOAT: The Greatest of All Time. Or...if not the greatest, at least better than the "other guy."

It's human nature. We want to do better, be better, have more, be more (or at least have the appearance thereof). We want to know that we're better off than somebody, smarter than somebody, more accomplished than somebody, we can't stand the idea of coming in last. When we do come in last, the common advice would be just to "take the L" and move on. That's short for "Take the Loss." It seems like in today's world, everything can be boiled down to either a "W" or an "L" - A win or a loss. And at the end of the day, people just want to be able point to their life (or at least the way it appears on social media) and be able to show that they're WINNING.

It's as if there's some big scoreboard in the sky tallying up everybody's "wins" and "losses" and you sure as heck don't want to end up on the losing side. The pressure is to always maintain the appearance that your life, your career, your bank account, your social life, and the people and causes you support, are succeeding. Never admit defeat or failure. And if you're secretly afraid things might be taking a turn just think of things you'd like to have and like "manifest it"!

The problem with this idea that life is just a string of W's and L's is that it pits us against one another. If you leave the "game" with a Win on your scorecard - that means someone else walked away with a Loss on theirs. And that's ok in sportsball...but it's not ok in life. We can't look at life as one big

competition, We can't measure our worth or success by how far we've managed to rise above our neighbor.

Although this flawed way of thinking has been amplified by the "digital scorecard" we're inundated by on social media, it's nothing new. In fact, it's the oldest play in the book. It's exactly what the disciples were fighting about amongst themselves when Jesus sat them down and asked: "What were you arguing about" back there? That question from Jesus strikes me like the kind of rhetorical question a parent might ask a toddler standing in front of the cookie jar with something stuffed in their mouth. "What you got in there? Hm?" When Jesus asked the question, that he already knew the answer. He knew they were arguing amongst themselves about who was the greatest.

He had waited to ask until they had reached their destination, had gotten off of their tired feet and had something to eat. When they were settled down "in the house" as the text said, and Jesus had seen the youngest child of the household watching the guests from behind her mother's apron. Only then does Jesus ask: "What were you arguing about on the way?" And you'll notice in these verses, the disciples don't actually ever answer. They don't have to. Jesus looks over to the little child, smiles at her warmly as she timidly toddles out of the doorway. "See this child?" Jesus says he scoops her up into his arms. "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me." The disciples don't have to answer his question. And Jesus doesn't have to scold them for their behavior. He simply has to show them a better way. And he does it - as usual - by showing them someone on the margins.

This little child - who played no role in providing them a safe place to stay - who was no help when it came to getting them something warm to eat - who could not contribute to their conversation - this little one was exactly who they needed to look to to understand the meaning of greatness in the kingdom of God. Greatness in the kingdom that Jesus came to bring had nothing to do with "winning," and everything to do with welcoming. It's not about who's on top, it's about how many can be squeezed in at the table. It's not about climbing the ladder, it's about bridging the gaps that exist between who is considered worthy by this world, and the intrinsic worth granted to each of God's children by the love of their creator.

Just like a wise and loving parent might do, Jesus recognized what happened on the road between the disciples as a teachable moment. So he waited until they were together in the house, when the hustle and bustle of travel had quieted and when he saw the perfect little teaching assistant to help him make his point. "It is to such as these," Jesus says of the little ones in their midst, "that the kingdom of heaven belongs." ...Not to those deemed "greatest" and "best" by this world...not to those lifted high by success or popularity...but to the little ones, to the meek and the humble, to the forgotten and ignored ones... *Seek them out*, Jesus is telling his followers. *"Notice them. Look at them through their mother's eyes - through my Father's eyes - and welcome them in...For their value in his eyes far surpasses any stature that can ever be awarded by the ways of the world."*

It's in these "teachable moments" Jesus conveys the message that there's no use wasting your breath arguing over greatness. Instead, save your voice to speak out for the little ones and lift up the lowly ones. Enough with the competition. Enough with the bickering. While you're busy trying to become kings the kingdom is more concerned with the fate of a little child.

And the truth of the topsy-turvy kingdom of God, Jesus shows them, is that in welcoming the child you will actually be welcoming the King of kings. In setting a place at the table for the littest and the least, you're preparing a place for the king. Because the reign of God manifests in spaces of radical welcome, equality, and sharing. Places like the family table, where everyone's place is valued, where everyone's presence is expected and valued, where everyone is fed, regardless of their contribution to the household income or their contribution to the family conflict for that matter. If you're part of this family, you're welcome at this table.

As I was following this thread of welcome in the family of God, I realized it tied in so nicely with the reading from Proverbs today. This passage is sometimes read as another description of "Lady Wisdom," the personification of the wisdom of God or even the Spirit of God. It's also sometimes referred to as the description of the "Proverbs 31 Woman." It describes a woman who diligently looks after the needs of her household and takes great care of her family.

The passage says, "She brings her food from far away, she rises while it is still night and provides food for her household"... "She opens her hand to the poor, and reaches out her hands to the needy"... "She looks well to the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness. Her children rise up and call her blessed" These verses have, over time, been used to praise the virtues of hard-working mothers and wives. Alternatively, they have also been weaponized to insist that the only appropriate role for women is work in and about the home.

But as we read the layered meaning of these verses we hear a description of not just traits of a good wife/mother but of the characteristics of God as well. God cares. God Provides. Scripture says God "sets a table before us," and that "our keeper neither slumbers or sleeps," but instead keeps watch over the going out and coming in of every member of her family. Just like that Proverbs 31 Woman, just like Lady Wisdom, just like Jesus, who came not to be served, but to serve... who went into the house and brought out the little child and put them in the midst of them saying: *You want to be great in the household of God? Welcome her. Pay attention to her. Look after her. Then you will see what God truly values.* And we'll see that those values have nothing to do with greatness in the eyes of the world, and everything to do with the Grace of God lavishly poured out upon people who could never earn it but can never lose it either.

So, go ahead and do your best. Give your all - go for the gold! Honor God by putting in your best effort by using the gifts you've been given to the best of your ability. Rise up early in the morning - do your work diligently - set the bar high when it comes to what you think you can achieve. But don't do it for the "W." Do it for the "G" - For the glory of God who gave you every good gift for the building up of the kingdom.