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Note, this isn't quite Sunday's sermon. This is a fleshed-out text from the notes I preached used. Due to a recording snafu, we don't have audio this week (sorry) so here's something if you missed worship and want to know what we talked about.

Greatness

Mark 9:30-37

They went on from there 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."

Exodus 3:1-15

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Then the Lord said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain."

But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I am who I am."^[a] He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I am has sent me to you.'" God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The Lord,^[b] the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you':

This is my name forever,
and this my title for all generations.

"On the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest."

So reads verse 34 of our text from Mark today.

My study bible has a note on this verse that reads, "*who was the greatest* – a point of controversy within social groups of antiquity."¹

It makes me smile to read it, "social groups of antiquity," as if this is a historical question and not a question that has preoccupied humanity for as long as we can remember.

Our first story of homicide in the bible is a story of jealous about greatness: in chapter 4 of Genesis, Cain and Abel both bring offerings to God – Cain the fruit of the ground and Abel a firstling from his flock. God likes Abel's offering, the first of his flock, better. Abel's offering is greater.

So, as older siblings have desired to do throughout history (I'm told by my own big brother) he takes out his younger sibling so there's no more competition. No more question of who's the greatest.

And lest we think that settles that, our argument of greatness has lived on until today:

- How many of you remember Muhammed Ali's claim of being *the greatest*?
- How many of you have eaten Frosted Flakes? Remember the slogan? Say it with me now: they're grrrrreat. (*They did say it with me – it was impressive!*)
- We've had a recent political slogan to Make America Great Again.
- Do any of you remember that R. Kelly song, "hey I made it. I'm the world's greatest." (*No one in church did, or at least admitted to knowing this song, which is probably for the better!*)

I posted on Facebook on Friday asking for your associations with greatness, and people chimed in with all kinds of things:

Amanda shared Nike's campaign slogan, *Find Your Greatness*.

Brian Cushing suggested The Great Gatsby, a haunting reflection on decadence and class as greatness.

¹ *The Harper Collins Study Bible*, The Gospel According to Mark, p. 1741 n9.34.

Margaret suggested Mount Washington as a symbol of greatness: the mountain that stands above the rest.

Others noted that many athletes have been named the greatest – Tom Brady as the GOAT (Greatest Of All Time). The Great Bambino – Babe Ruth.

We could list more I'm sure if I asked you to.

Greatness is the stuff of competitions and sports, advertisement campaigns, music, novels, our great and haunting stories, and the mountain peaks that frame our landscape. It's debated by commentators, historians, siblings, and disciples worldwide and across time and space.

As Ecclesiastes (1.9) reads:

What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is what will be done;
there is nothing new under the sun.

In other words, debating our greatness is not new. We've been doing it since our stories began, and we're doing it still today.

I'm pretty sure Jesus, who was not impressed with the Disciples as they argued over greatness, would be equally unimpressed with our cultural infatuation with greatness, at least as we've defined it – as best, most powerful, wealthiest, tallest and best-selling.

I confess, I'm guilty of misconstruing greatness in my own life – you who were in worship last week saw the result of that. I thought for a minute that being a great pastor meant going all cylinders all the time, no matter what my body said. So rather than calling in sick when I didn't feel well, well, you know that story as you lived it with me, we don't need to dwell on it. I tried to be great in the wrong way and it was not great.

What about you? How have you misconstrued greatness in your life?

Have you thought greatness meant:

wealth, or power?
some perfect body that looked different than yours, as if God didn't create us all perfect as we are?
some version of parenting where you never raise your voice, or relationship where you never argue, or life where you never cry or mess up?
some performance of perfection?

It's been millennia that we've failed to learn this, so let's listen today. Maybe you and I will be the people who finally dare to let go of all that and live in to what Jesus defines as great.

Here's what Jesus says, in response to the Disciples' arguments of greatness:

Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.
Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.

And then to illustrate his point, he scoops up a little one.

This sounds sweet to me, as I imagine Jesus scooping up one of our little ones.

But Jesus picking up a child wasn't about sweetness – he was (as always) making a point.

In the ancient world, culture around little ones was different. In the words of professor David Lose, “children were of no account... they had no rights, no influence, no standing. They were utterly dependent, utterly vulnerable, utterly powerless.”²

The point Jesus is making is one he's made hundreds of times in his ministry, a trope we call the “reversal of fortunes.” Whenever we think we know the story, Jesus tips it on its head.

Want to have big faith? Have faith as small as a mustard seed.

Want to know about God's grace? Who does God throw the welcome for – the brother who stayed, or the prodigal brother who left and returned late in the story? The prodigal who came home. That's how grace works.

Want to be great? Be last, and serve others.

For Jesus, greatness is about serving, and not just serving but serving the most vulnerable among us. Those without rights or protection. In Jesus day, the children. In our day, the children. And the refugees. The homeless, the poor. Those living with addiction and mental illness, survivors of violence and survivors of sexual assault. Veterans recovering from war, all who are lonely and hurting, I could go on – it's all whom power and privilege seem to have forgotten.

In the words of Professor Elisabeth Johnson, “True greatness, Jesus says, is not to be above others, but to be least of all and servant of all. It is not to ascend the social ladder but rather descend it, taking the lowest place. It is not to seek the company of the powerful, but to welcome and care for those without status, such as the child that Jesus embraces and places before his disciples.”³

Our Hebrew Bible story today was the call of Moses. We'll talk more about Moses next week, as we hear the story of the parting of the red sea. Today, as we think about greatness, we can note in Moses' story: his very name, Moses, means child. He's not a powerful king or

² David Lose, “Pentecost 18B: A Different Kind of Greatness,” *...in the meantime*, 9.17.18, <http://www.davidlose.net/2018/09/pentecost-18-b-a-different-kind-of-greatness/>.

³ Elisabeth Johnson, “Commentary on Mark 9:30-37,” *Preach this Week* from Luther Seminary, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3785

ruler, he's a shepherd with a lisp who doesn't particularly want to lead. And he stumbles through his leadership imperfectly and God still uses him and makes him great, servant of God and of the Israelites even as they grumble their way through the exodus.

And when God names Godself to Moses, God says not, "I am the Great and Powerful God, Great Creator of All That Is, Best God of All Time," (though God is all of that.) God names Godself simply, I Am Who I Am.

Another translation says "The One who causes it all to be." And in verse 8, God tells Moses what God is about in this world: I have heard their cry, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey." (Exodus 3:7-8)

Our Great God is "I Am," the God of Deliverance and Liberation.

Greatness as we live it is not God's greatness, not the greatness Christ is calling us to. It's not about being the best, most powerful, flawless or standing out above the rest. It's about service. Humbling ourselves to care for those around us who are most vulnerable, most forgotten by privilege and power.

How would our lives change if this were how we viewed greatness? How would our world change?

What if we applied Jesus' ethic of greatness to those cultural ideas about greatness we began with this morning:

What if greatness for Muhammed Ali, Tom Brady, Babe Ruth and other sports players was not for perfect games but their generous acts of service.

What if instead of R. Kelly's song *hey I made it, I'm the world's greatest* being about personal greatness, what if we wrote songs about caring for the vulnerable, great acts of love for those in need?

What if "Make America Great Again" was about making ours a country that truly puts children, the stranger, the vulnerable and powerless among us first.

What if The Great Gatsby and other stories that capture our imagination were stories of exceptional kindness and generosity, humble servant characters that capture our hearts.

And what if our advertising campaigns were be about goodness and care –

buy these shoes for someone who needs them

buy these jeans with lots of pockets so you can carry spare change to give away or spare granolas to share with those who are hungry.

Can you imagine such a world? Jesus did. In fact, he's inviting us to create it.

Alleluia, and amen.